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## whitenoise

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# **whitenoise**

**A senior thesis submitted to**  
The Department of  
College of Arts & Sciences

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for a Bachelor of Arts degree in Creative Writing

by

**Micah Jenae Beukelman**

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**Concordia University**  
**Portland, Oregon**  
**May, 2020**

## ABSTRACT

*whitenoise* is a creative memoir that explores themes of abuse, mental illness, self-harm, and recovery. Through a selection of poetry and prose, the author documents her life from early childhood to adulthood, dissecting and spreading apart relationships and recurring dreams to find the bones that connect. This memoir illuminates the aftermath of abuse and trauma and the never-ending recovery process. The author utilizes poetry and prose alike to unearth buried memories in order to continue the path to healing.

# whitenoise

by: Micah Jenae Beukelman

*to my mother and my sisters—  
—who never left me even when I wanted them to.*

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## INTRODUCTION

All my life, I have been a writer. As long as I can remember, putting pen to paper and making words out of nothing has been my lifeblood. One of my first foundational memories takes place in the second grade when I wrote my first story: a Scooby Doo fan fiction in which I created an entire new character and a plot. I was proud of it then and only somewhat ashamed of it now. I wish I still had that wide-ruled notebook so I could look back at my growth. What this entire thesis project has distilled down to is just that: growth.

When I first joined the Concordia family, I was a double major—a glutton for punishment, if you will. I was an Elementary Education major, high off my first teaching job, and an English major because I had to keep that passion alive. I had lived life without writing and never wanted to do that again. Quickly into my first semester, I dropped my education major and committed to becoming a Creative Writing major in a dying College of Arts and Sciences program. I never regretted that decision. The first skeleton of a thesis I developed was a memoir written in the second person perspective, something that would stretch my skills and grab the reader and make them feel everything I felt, something to take the pressure off myself. I was going to write a play about my experiences with organized religion. I was going to include journal entries and doctor's notes and transcriptions from my therapy appointments. Very quickly, I realized that this wasn't *me*. I didn't want to write those things and use those formats so I scrapped everything and started over.

The struggle with writing a thesis is in the whole “trusting yourself” thing (although trying to write an entire memoir and introduction while reading four different books in five months was up there with anxiety inducing things). I have never trusted myself, my skills, my

memories. So in September with my first thesis meeting, I made the decision to write what I wanted and why I wanted. Those two things have been the driving force behind producing *whitenoise*.

I set aside the first skeleton and dug around for an owl pellet, something small I could hold on to that would blossom and grow into something I could throw my heart into. It hit me one night after I woke up from a recurring nightmare I've had since I was a child. The white noise dream. I wrote four poems about this dream, each specific to the four ages I can remember them: six, ten, sixteen, and twenty-four. From this moment, from the first poem, I knew this would be the title, the first running theme, and the thread that ties it all together. This was what I wanted to write: my experience with that ever-so anxiety inducing sound of whitenoise.

I often feel that it is difficult to talk about writing about depression and mental illness without mentioning Sylvia Plath. No doubt, *The Bell Jar* was one of the most inspiring pieces to me while writing this work. The most hollowly resounding portion of Plath's work is the analogy of the fig tree:

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet  
.(Plath 77)

I often find myself in the same fig tree, surrounded by opportunities. This anxiety, this looming decision that needs resolving, follows me, albeit in a different way. By the age of twenty, I had

already tried to kill myself on three separate occasions. The idea of living to be twenty-one, twenty-four, *thirty* was intangible and disgusting. This life that I carried around me, these burdens of my past that stack like bricks on my shoulders, weighed me down and made it impossible for me to want to live. I know what pulled me out; it was writing. Audre Lorde writes that “poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 1). I know in my heart of poemhearts, that this was my saving grace.

I had lived almost a decade with buried memories. The house inside my head was filled with dust bunnies and growing mounds of moving dust. Every corner was cobwebbed and crawling, filled with memories I was too afraid of confronting. I could write in the sparsest details these events without labeling them and still feel that cathartic release. I could write about my rape (before I knew it was rape) and feel somewhat better. I could write about the choking, the suicide, the strained relationship with my father, the surmounting wave of never-good-enough that always threatened to pull me under. I could write about whatever I needed to and I could keep all of those things at bay—at least for a little bit.

That is what this memoir amounts to. This memoir, this monstrous beast of a thing, is addressing my past. One of my favorite books, the most life-changing book I’ve ever read, writes about abuse, trauma, self-harm and the like. The leading character, the object of these terrible things thinks this about his own pain:

He feels his past is a cancer, one he should have treated long ago but instead ignored...

Now when they appear, they are wordless: they stand before him, they sit, side by side, on the sofa in his bedroom, staring at him, and this is worse than if they spoke, because he knows they are trying to decide what to do with him, and he knows that whatever they

decide will be worse than he can imagine, worse than what had happened before. At one point he sees them whispering to each other, and he knows they are talking about him. “Stop,” he yells at them, “stop, stop,” but they ignore him, and when he tries to get up to make them leave, he is unable to do so. (Yanagihara 693)

For years, my past has been a cancer. I should have treated it immediately instead of allowing it to fester and grow, metastasize, distort. I finished reading this book, *A Little Life*, in September just before my thesis journey began. Had I not read this book when I did, I never would have had the courage to attempt to vanquish my own cancerous past. This was the why. I was—and still am—exhausted from fighting. It sometimes doesn’t seem worth it to continue white-knuckling everything and to keep pushing through and swinging my wordsword and hacking away at memories. But I know that if I should ever want to stop, everything I’ve done to this point would have been for naught. All this writing, all of this talking, stewing, crying—it all would have been for nothing if I just gave up and died. So the why is this: because I deserve to push through and live the life I deserve. I deserve a cancer-free life. I deserve to only have faint scars and not pulsating wounds that ooze and steam. I am the why.

Perhaps this isn’t the analysis you were expecting. I don’t know whether you care about my process or my inspiration or how long it took me to write this. I don’t know that you care that I spend hours sitting in the same position trying to write. You don’t care that I think em dashes are a godsend or that I think making up new words by pushing two together is the coolest thing I’ve ever done. You don’t care that I had to set timers to write.

I began *whitenoise* in September of 2019. I finished *whitenoise* in February of 2020. She is 150 pages, 31,972 words, and finished.

I sat at the table in my little apartment. I broke two chairs while writing it. I burned through six candles, drank five bottles of vodka, ate endless pints of ice cream, and wore through three pairs of sweatpants. I skipped countless meals and lost days of sleep.

My process is write, cry, sleep, repeat.

Maybe you wanted to know which authors inspired my writing, who I stole from, who I tried to embody and let me tell you this. Who cares? This isn't about them. This isn't about their great works and the wonderful things they accomplish. This isn't plugging their works and my work in and trying to find a common thread. This is about *me* and I'm going to make it about *me*. My entire life, I have made it about others. I have given my time and my energy and my love to those who don't deserve it. I have wasted time trying to be someone I'm not to make people who don't matter happy. I'm tired of it. As exhausted as I am fighting my own past, I am more exhausted pretending to be someone else, someone happy, someone whole. This memoir is not about the great authors who came before me who paved the way. This analysis is not about someone else's skills. This is about me.

For once, I'm doing something for me.

And now, I present my bleeding poemheart for you to partake in.

*whitenoise*

Micah Jenae Beukelman

April 2020

# prologue

every poem. here.  
is an unwrite.  
of all that has been written in me without. permission

- *nejma* by Nayyirah Waheed

## The Zipper

11:00 p.m.

Time to fall apart.

A droplet runs down my cheek, forming a line in my foundation, and my mascara bleeds it into grey. The microfiber cloth comes away vaguely flesh-toned and I think my skin has rubbed off.

Another day spent together, one piece, a whole and singular body working toward survival. I sigh, a deeply intrinsic and troubling sigh that comes from a place beyond the cavity in my chest, behind my lungs. It comes from deeper—the soul maybe, or even the heart, the symbolic representation of *me*—it sighs. This place, this cavernous, consuming mouth in my body groans.

My face is red from scrubbing, eyes blurred from the dripping makeup. There's nothing left to take off except my clothes. I shed them and stand in front of the mirror, naked and shaking.

And I have this thought as I look at myself in the mirror: I wish I had a zipper on my chest, running from clavicle to navel that I could tug on and release everything, pulling, unhinging tiny teeth. The exposed laced-fingers ribcage, the metallic twist of fascia, the movement of heartbeat and breath sound. Then, I could unzip with one hand and reach with the other beneath my lungs, dig, root, search. Find. I could grab onto that place behind myself, grip it tight, and wrench it out.

I wonder what that place would look like. Maybe it would be a shadow I hold on to. Maybe it would be a tangle of blood vessels and fibers like a smaller nervous system inside my chest. Maybe it would be another heart, weaker and darker. Maybe it would just be a ghost-feeling, the silhouette of something that used to be there but isn't anymore or maybe never was in the first place. But I would reach in, twist my hand around my spine, and just feel for something. Anything.

Even if nothing is there, maybe it would feel better. Like someone who has lost a limb and feels phantom pain, maybe I feel something that used to be there but hasn't been for a long time. Maybe simply putting my hand in this place and feeling the emptiness would be enough for me to *feel* something.

I watch the process in reverse.

I wake up in the morning, stretch, weigh myself, brush my teeth. Before I get dressed for the day, I stuff the shadow, the cluster of blood vessels and nerves, the small heart, the ghostly silhouette of a feeling, back into my chest into the space where it belongs, buried under my lungs and heart.

I take a deep breath,  
let it settle back  
and reconnect to my body.

I grip the zipper with my thumb and forefinger and pull it up. I seal myself, a mortician stitching closed a cadaver.

I am together, held by metal prongs and willpower. I spend the day in a place where I feel like an imposter, exposed by my zipper, only to come home, tear my chest open, and yank out the only thing in my body that keeps me together.

Closed, I am whole, open I am undone.



## **No One Will Hear You**

The forest is cold or maybe it's cold because fear is a cold feeling, frigid and bone-chilling and she's terrified as he pulls her through the woods past his backyard away from his house and his brother and his father and the protection of his mother into the dense forest and up the mountain further and further away from anything she knows and is comfortable with and her fear grows and grows like a creeping afternoon shadow in her stomach, choking everything and strangling her and she loses herself in the fear and it's all she sees.

His hand: slick against hers, holding her hand too tight.

Her breath: buckling like her knees, sharp in her chest.

Then his hand drops and her palm is colder from the sweat of his that remained. She looks around and he's nowhere.

She calls out.

Silence.

Quiet.

not peaceful because his absence is concerning and he's in one of  
those world-conquering moods

She calls out again.

Broken twig.

Bird calls.

hands scrape on rough pine bark as she checks behind trees for the  
boy she loves

She wanders...wonders...

Turns around.

Trees unfamiliar.

Sky unclear.

Head fuzzy.

Him, gone.

Voice hoarse.

Turns around again.

Lost.

She has no cellphone; it's in her purse in her car. She turns once more, picks a direction, and starts walking. She checks over her shoulder every few seconds or every noise she hears which is often because the woods are a noisy place. She doesn't know how long she has been walking or how many times she has called out his name or how many trees she has passed or if she has left his family's property already.

She passes one big tree, a fir or a juniper or a spruce and her heart jumps in her throat when hands wrap around her and shove her against the tree she wishes she knew the name of. She doesn't know why she wants to know the name of the tree. Maybe it would help the remembering later on when she's in therapy. Something to solidify the memory, cement it in time and place.

His hands, both, wrap around her throat. Thumbs cradle the contours of her windpipe.

These are not the eyes of the boy she loves.

These are not the lips of the boy who gave her her first kiss.

These are not the hands of the boy who held her.

These are not his. They don't belong to him.

Her sweater rides up in the back and the bark scratches against her bare skin. Her vision swims with panicked tears. Snot drips from her nose as she cries and scratches at the hands around her neck.

"I'm going to fuck you," he hisses. "I'm going to fuck you here in the forest and no one will hear you."

# part one: silence

“You are braver than you believe,  
stronger than you seem,  
and smarter than you think.”  
- A. A. Milne

## The Lullaby

*Een gezongen gebedje voor het slapen gaan.*  
A sung prayer before going to sleep.

*Ik ga slapen, ik ben moe,*  
I'll go to sleep, I'm tired  
*Sluit mijn beide oogjes toe,*  
I'll close both my eyes,  
*Heer houdt ook deze nacht, over M getrouw de wacht*  
Lord, loyally guard this night over M  
*Amen.*

## **The Archaeologist**

She is five years old, in kindergarten. She goes to a private Christian school in central California. It is a small school with one class per grade with a maximum of twenty-five students per class. The school is on the city fairgrounds, so each May the school shuts down for a few weeks so the fair can be held. Her kindergarten teacher is a small woman who seems large, due in part to the fact that the little girl is short and her teacher is tall in comparison. The reality is that the kindergarten teacher was a small woman. She can't remember how to spell her teacher's name but she remembers she used to get called Mrs. Hokey-Pokey.

At this little Christian school, they have chapel every Friday morning. The classes say the Pledge of Allegiance with their little hands over their hearts, repeating words they don't understand. Attendance is taken and they walk the two blocks to the church where chapel is held. The kindergarten class takes the first two rows closest to the stage and the other classes file in. The sixth, seventh, and eighth graders take up the rows at the very back of the chapel.

The little girl's uncle leads worship and smiles at her from the stage. She gives him a little wave.

After worship, the principal asks all of the students whose birthdays are this week to make their way to the stage. He asks every child what their name is, how old they are, and what they want to be when they grow up. The little girl is standing towards the back of the line, thinking of exactly what she wants to say. She has seen too many students fumble over their words and shy away from the microphone. She has replayed the answer to his questions over and over in her head. The Principal, Mr. V, approaches her with a smile and asks her name. "My name is M."

“And how old are you?”

“Six.”

“And what do you want to be when you grow up?”

She takes a breath, swallows, and grins. “I want to be an archaeologist.”

It is the biggest word she has ever said and she can feel her uncle beaming at her, shaking his head with amusement. She doesn’t know exactly what the word means but it sounds cool and she thinks it has to do with traveling and digging things up. Later on, she’ll equate ‘archaeologist’ with Indiana Jones and she’ll be even more convinced that this is the path her life must take.

Mr. V chuckles, pats her on the top of her head, and moves on to the next child. Everything after that is irrelevant because all that mattered was that she didn’t stutter and stumble over her words.

She was practiced, poised, and perfect.

*Later on, she’s in her early twenties, she’ll remember that she wanted to be an archaeologist. Before she discovered English and poetry and novels, she wanted to discover cultures and people. And when she’s talking to a professor after a particularly difficult week, she realizes that she is, in a sense, an archaeologist. She has spent the last week trying to uncover hidden memories. For years she has buried things and pretended they didn’t exist just so she can make it day to day without drowning. But now that she needs to heal, she’s unburying things she’s kept hidden for so long. She always wanted to be an archaeologist. And now she is.*

## Social Butterfly

White cap, white gown in mid-June.

She sits beside her second cousin, B, at kindergarten graduation.

Her name is called and she walks to her teacher, Mrs. Hokey-Pokey.

She hugs her, shakes the principal's hand, and the teacher smiles and takes the microphone.

"M is such a joy in the classroom. She is everyone's friend and she is always the first to stand up to help anyone who asks for it. For that reason, M is the kindergarten class of 2000's Social Butterfly."

M scans the sea of proud parents and looks for her tall father with his bristly mustache. He sees her looking and waves from one of the middle rows. Her mother, with her permed blond hair and her little sister F on her lap, tosses her head back with laughter.

~

*"Do you remember kindergarten, M?" her father asks her one day. She is in her twenties and it is right before she moves to Portland.*

*She nods absently, not paying attention as the fields of yellow alfalfa pass by. They drive down the highway to Home Depot, not necessarily by choice. He wants to spend time with her; reconnect with her; get to know her again. She doesn't really care, doesn't really like her father but doesn't want to disappoint him. She goes along with it.*

*"Kinda makes you wonder what happened, huh?"*

*She quirks an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"*

*"You got that award for being Social Butterfly. And now you're more reserved. Kinda makes you wonder what happened."*

*She feels her heart rate pick up, her pulse vibrating in her neck. "I don't wonder. I know exactly what happened."*

*Her father turns to face her as he downshifts the yellow bug into third gear. "What happened?"*

*"C happened. He took that away from me."*

*"Think you'll find her again?"*

*She shakes her head. "She's gone."*



## **The Almond Orchard**

Row after row of almond trees, full of pink blossoms and buzzing bees. In the middle of the trees are strips of grass and wildflowers. Swirling cirrostratus clouds drift from the Sierra Nevadas through the petals and the sun peeks by, waving with golden sunbeams and soft caresses. Squirrels chitter and rabbits run through the tall wild roses that crop up along the edges of the rows. Robins dig their little beaks in, rooting for a meal. Warmth radiates from the ground. A warm April gust lifts pink petals through the air in a pastel flurry.

## whitenoise age 6

im not in my bedroom but im in a room  
i cant find the door but thats okay cuz im not scared  
its really quiet and it makes me happy cuz i like the quiet  
theres no toys or games or books to play with or read so i lay down on the ground and i take a  
nap  
i sleep for a long time and wake up and stretch and it feels good  
everything is soft and smooth like oma's furry cheek  
i lay down again and take another nap

~

i wake up not in my bedroom but im in a room  
i cant find the door and I'm scared  
its loud and scratchy here and my tummy hurts like i might throw up  
everything is sharp and when i walk it doesnt feel good  
i want to sleep but it feels pointy and icky  
i start to cry and scream and throw a fit but i cant hear it and i dont think ill ever leave this room  
maybe im stuck here forever

## Indiana Jones

In a little fishbowl valley nearer to Sacramento than to San Francisco, is a dairy with a two story house painted sky blue with a slate grey roof. A family of eight lives there, a tall man with a mustache and his short and beautiful wife. Together, they have six children.

Every night, this big family crowds around a table and eats dinner together. They hold hands before the meal and take turns praying. It is M's turn to pray. She holds hands with her mom and one of her older sisters and everyone closes their eyes. In a small voice, she recites the prayer she has always known: "*Heere zegen daze spijzen om Jesus wil, amen.*"

After the dinner of boiled potatoes and gravy, bloemkool, and meatloaf, the table is cleared. M prays once again: *Here dank u voor daze spijzen om Jesus wil, amen.*"

M is happy living on the dairy. She doesn't mind the smell or the hum of machinery or the constant lowing of livestock. She even thinks the cows are cute with their giant brown eyes and their long eyelashes that blink slowly.

Her favorite part of living in the country is the grass. She sneaks into A and H's room on the second floor of the house and looks out the window. All she can see is an expanse of green, a field of wheat—it is green for now but in a few months it'll be yellow and ready for harvest. She sits and watches the wind blow through the sea of jade. It is a fluid motion and though she has never been to the ocean, she imagines that is what a wave looks like. It is like God is taking a hairbrush and running it through the wheat, the way it ripples and bends.

Her mother's voice echoes up the staircase, calling her to go play outside. She pulls on dirty tennis shoes and a purple sweater with deep pockets—pockets deep enough to hold a wealth of treasure.

She runs down the stairs, through the kitchen and living room, and throws open the French doors. She stands on the step and considers what game she will play today. M decides she will leave the yard and traverse the ditches around her house and pretend to be Indiana Jones, discovering ancient civilizations on the other side of the fence.

The beginning of her journey starts on the left side of the driveway behind the wood shed. She steps onto the dirt path that goes around the fence that separates the house from the wheat fields. It isn't wide, perhaps a foot of space, but she side-steps with her back against the fence, pretending that she's walking a thin ledge. One misstep and she will tumble to the bottomless chasm like the Walk of Faith in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

She reaches the corner of the fence and wades through the wheat. It reaches her hips and she wields a stick-machete to hack down the shoots of bamboo to get to the treasure: the mound of owl pellets beneath the giant palm tree.

The tricky part of the journey to the treasure are the giant palm tree spiders like Shelob in *Lord of the Rings*.

She crouches down in the bamboo, sets her machete on her knees, and analyzes the situation. If she runs in guns ablaze, the spiders will surely awaken from their slumber and chase her. If she sneaks in and trips a booby trap, the spiders will definitely wake up and chase her. M is not a lucky girl but she *is* a smart girl. She looks down at her feet, takes the tip of her machete,

and digs for a big rock. In the clay beneath the topsoil is a rock the size of her fist. She knows that if she throws it, the spiders will be distracted and she can run in and find the treasure.

With a deep breath, M stands up and lobs the rock as far as her little six-year-old arms can. When the spiders are far enough away, she runs as fast as she can to where the treasure is.

She drops to her knees at the corner of the fence beneath the palm fronds and starts digging through the owl pellets. For a normal girl, the pellets might have been scary with the little rib cages and skulls peeking out, but she thinks they're cool. They aren't big things, maybe the size of her thumb. Brown and round, they smell earthy and musty almost like the mothballs in her other Oma's closet. They are firm but not so firm that they cannot be squished and spread apart.

M carefully roots through the pile, setting the fully formed owl pellets to her left and the broken ones to her right. She is determined to find an intact vertebrae to complete her collection. Hidden in a drawer in her nightstand, M has a full set of mouse bones she has delicately pulled from owl pellets. She has a skull, little boney paws, and femurs. But a perfect spine has eluded her for all of her adventures.

At the bottom of the mound of owl pellets, she finds it.

The fragile curve of spine rests in her grubby hands—the ivory white stark against her grimy palms.

She doesn't have time to admire it because the spiders are back and now her mother is calling her in for dinner. She rolls her eyes and knows that if she ignores her mom, she'll be in a heap of trouble. She weighs the consequences of staying out longer and decides it isn't worth the spanking.

Once inside, her mother is furious. She is covered in dust and there is dirt in her hair and on her face. M doesn't mention the mouse bones in her pocket but lets her mother fuss over her. If her mother knew she was hacking through bamboo with a machete and digging through piles of skeletons and running from giant, hungry spiders, she would never be allowed to go adventuring. So when her mother asks her what she has been doing, M replies: just playing.

She doesn't take off her sweater and when she sits down, she slips her hand into her pocket and gently strokes the curve of the vertebrae, feeling the ridges and edges against her fingertips. It weighs less than air, but the weight of knowing she has a forbidden treasure in her pocket is riveting.

Dinner tonight is pork roast, pickled red cabbage, and boiled potatoes.

It is her turn to pray: "*Heere zegen daze spijzen om Jesus wil, amen.*"

## whitenoise age 10

I'm in a room. It's square. Everything is soft. The walls are pillows and the floor is squishy like the mats mama puts under sleeping bags or the ones we do somersaults on at school. There are no sharp corners even though the room is square because every surface is soft. When I walk around it's like stepping through soft grass or walking on a cloud. It's quiet. There's no yelling. There's no crying from my brother, P. There's no telephone ringing. No movies blaring in the background. It's just soft and quiet. I walk around until I'm standing in the center of the room. Everything is okay here. I want to stay in The Soft Room forever.

~

Before I do anything else, I'm suddenly in a different room. This room is topsy-turvy. It isn't square or rectangular or circular. It's all of the shapes and none of the shapes. This room is edges and corners and sharp angles. I walk through the room and it's like I'm stepping on cardboard box corners that won't collapse or P's legos. It hurts and I want to leave The Sharp Room. But I can't because there aren't any doors so I'm stuck. And then the noise starts. It's the sound the VCR makes when the movie is over and the TV doesn't turn off. It's the sound of the machine that Papa uses to help him fall asleep. It's the sound of the air beating on the car during a car wash. It's the sound of pulling a dryer sheet off of my favorite sweater. It sets my teeth on edge and makes my skin crawl and I can't get it to stop. I scream but the sound of the static is too much and drowns out every note that rips from my throat. This is the Sharp Room and I can't wake up fast enough to leave.

## Building Fires

She learned how to build a fire when she was ten years old.

Her grandfather sat on the edge of the stone hearth, a glass of merlot in one hand and a bowl of cocktail peanuts balanced on his knee. She can't hear his voice anymore—it faded a year after he died.

But she knows what he's saying.

Crumple the newspaper and set it on the grate.

Lay the kindling on top.

Then, open the woodbox, and grab six pieces of almond wood.

Three on the bottom

then two

then one

Crumple more newspaper and stuff it under the grate.

Open the matchbook.

Strike.

Light some of the paper.

Wait.

Then, when the paper underneath the kindling is starting to catch, take the bellow and softly, *so softly*, coax the fire to life.

And if it doesn't take, add more paper and keep trying.



## **King's Creek and the Bird**

They're driving and have been for hours or maybe it feels like hours because time moves so slowly when you're ten. Papa pulls their suburban through the mountains with the windows open. It feels like they're flying. The chill of the mountain air is crisp and fresh in M's lungs.

The road is darkened by heavy and looming pine trees.

They're almost there.

And then they are.

The mountains give way and part for the family like Papa is Moses.

Soft green grass dances in the wind like the wheat fields at home. The creek is crystalline and freezing from the snow melt and even though it's late July, it's as cold as if it were fresh melted snow.

Papa pulls over onto the shoulder—the eight of them, Mama and Papa and the six kids. They run from the car and as soon as the grass meets the toes of their shoes, the children are untying laces, ripping at Velcro, and tugging at socks.

They run free and fast to get to King's Creek, stepping on sharp rocks and soft grass.

All they want is to dip their sweaty little toes into the cool mountain run-off.

And when they do?

Heaven.

The girls put socks on damp feet, unroll jeans that are patchy-wet, sweep back hair full of tangles, and pile back into the suburban.

P sits barefoot in his carseat in the middle row of seats, then F, then M.

P giggles over and over and over: koe-poop, koe-poop, koe-poop, koe-poop.

H sweeps his white-blond hair from his forehead tenderly, motherly like she always is.

“P, you’re so articulate.”

He frowns. “I not ‘ticular...I handsome!”

The suburban erupts in laughter. Everyone is happy for a while and M looks at her family, each of them, and feels this intense love for everyone that she cannot begin to express.

The windows are down again, Burlap to Cashmere playing through the stereo.

*There’s a place where I come from  
It’s the place where I belong  
Where you will never die  
Wipe the tears off from your eyes*

Everyone sings the lyrics and no one knows what they mean, but when the chorus hits, the car gets raucous:

*Diggee diggee dime dime diggee diggee dime  
Diggee diggee dime dime diggee diggee dime*

And maybe in this same memory, this same trip to Lassen National Park, something lands in M’s lap and flops onto the center console between her parents.

M screams.

P screams.

F screams.

The entire car is screaming and no one knows why.

“What was that?” A cries out, pushing her glasses up her nose.

J and H are both chattering to each other, running through all the possibilities of what it could have been.

F and M are both crying, faces red and noses running. P is still giggling about the koe-poop and it isn’t until Mama starts to laugh that they all realize they aren’t in mortal danger.

A bird had flown in through the open window and landed in M’s lap.

She doesn’t remember what comes next, whether they pulled over and let the bird out or if Mama tossed it out the window. But M remembers the laughter, the tears of unabashed joy, the pain in their stomachs from laughing so hard, the fancy sandwiches mama made after long hikes, eating at the Burger Depot in Chester, California—the restaurant with the little toy train that travels through every room of the building above their heads.

So many memories beyond her reach—

## part two: static

unbeingdead isn't beingalive

- e.e. cummings

## Gaps

—so many spaces in my memory  
like the gaps in my  
teeth, as sporadic and unreliable as thunderclaps in  
July, bare bones, the scaffolding of  
construction, missing links I can't fill  
in, breaks in the day like I'm missing  
hours

It is May, 2009

I am freshly fourteen  
I am at a party  
His eyes are stormy wide, cerulean  
There's apple cider with cinnamon stir sticks  
He is older than me  
S, my best friend, wants him  
We play "Honey, If You Love Me"  
S straddles my lap, C watches (smiling)  
She asks the question: "Honey, if you love me, won't you please smile?"  
She touches me.  
I smile.

It's December, 2010

I am fifteen  
It's two weeks before our Christmas choir concert  
He emails me, asking advice on a necklace for his mother  
He emails me, asking advice on his relationship with my best friend

It's January, 2011

I am almost sixteen  
We have been best friends for a month  
I am in love with him  
My other friend, R, tells me I deserve to be happy  
I tell him I love him  
He breaks up with S  
He's mine now

Everything in between is lost

## Crimes and Punishment

C [REDACTED] M [REDACTED] #1193--

Age		Status	
26		Probation	
Offense	Sentencing County	Case No.	Sentence Satisfaction Date
INJURY TO A CHILD 18-1501 (1)	KOOTENAI	CR15-38 [REDACTED]	9/16/2021

*Data current as of: 4:22am Tuesday October 1st 2019*

### [REDACTED] CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS

[REDACTED]  
VULNERABLE

[REDACTED] to [REDACTED] harm [REDACTED] pain [REDACTED] its person [REDACTED] is punishable [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Any [REDACTED] who [REDACTED] permits any [REDACTED] to suffer [REDACTED] over the [REDACTED] years commits the [REDACTED] vessel [REDACTED] guardian who chooses [REDACTED] to act [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] well-being [REDACTED]

## **The First Kiss**

She was always a romantic. She cried at happy endings on Disney movies and sobbed at the swell of certain songs. She got goosebumps when her sister played Josh Groban on the piano. She sat on the step just out of the dining room that led to the playroom and listened to her sister play and she cried and felt so much so intensely that she couldn't handle it. The weight of feeling things was too much and nothing but crying helped alleviate it. She was always a romantic.

Her first kiss had so many expectations tied to it. Face cradled in hands with long, dexterous fingers. Eyes filled with love and tenderness. Stomach full of butterflies. It's autumn and the fire colored leaves crunch beneath their boots. Maybe it's a pumpkin patch or an apple orchard. Their tongues taste like cider or mulled wine. As soon as their lips meet, the wind swirls the leaves around them and the birds sing and everything is perfect and it's love.

That's not what happened. There is no face cradling or thin, beautiful fingers. These hands are harsh and wrapped in her hair and on her neck. His eyes are blue but not the soft and kind eyes she dreamed of. These eyes are cold and harsh and unfeeling. Her stomach is filled with something, not butterflies. Maybe spiders or ticks crawling around in her bowels and filling her with unease and discomfort. It's February 26th, 2011. It's in a Starbucks parking lot by the movie theater downtown. It's overcast and cold but he doesn't make her feel warm. He amplifies the cold because cold is fear and she's afraid. His tongue tastes like cigarettes and ash and shitty burned coffee and spearmint gum and like he hasn't brushed his teeth for two days. Their lips meet and there's no wind and no birds and it's not perfect and she knows it isn't love but she

convinces herself it is because kissing is only for those who love each other. He says he loves her but she knows he doesn't. He loves what he thinks she can do with her lips and that cavern between her thighs and what her palms can do and what he can do between her tits. He likes the possibilities of her and she likes the attention.

He pushes his lips against hers and his beard is itchy and his fingers dig into her scalp and the soft flesh of her neck. She didn't realize that kissing involved so much body and she didn't realize how wet it would be. Was it supposed to be wet like that? Was it supposed to be cold that way? Was his tongue supposed to feel like an eel in her mouth? Were his teeth supposed to clack against hers? And what was digging against her thigh? Panic fills her mouth and crowds out his tongue. What if she's bad at kissing? What if he doesn't like the way she kisses? She's never done this before but what if she's doing it all wrong what if he gets mad what will he do to her oh god what if her parents find out she'll be dead she's suddenly feeling very ashamed she pulls her face away from his and her lips kind of ache a little bit but it's more like a throbbing or a pulsing like if her lips were sunburnt or she was dehydrated they're very chapped she looks into those cold blue eyes she smiles at him. He doesn't smile back. He says he wasn't done and goes in for more but this time he pushes her against her car with his hips and he draws back and pushes again in this weird rocking movement she doesn't like but she doesn't say anything because she's still afraid. He groans in her mouth. She doesn't know what to do with her hands. She rests them on his chest and then moves them around his neck and then tries to touch his face but feels weird about it so she lets her hands drop by her sides and that's that.



## No One Will Hear You

It is March and she just dyed her hair and it smells like henna dye. She's just finished blow drying it and is brushing it through when her phone starts to ring. She answers it with a soft *hello* as she runs her brush through her now red hair.

"My brother G's birthday party is today. Wanna come?" C asks. His voice is distant and hollow.

"I have to ask my mom but if she says yes, then yeah. I'll definitely come. Wanna text me your address?" He hangs up and his address appears on her screen. She asks her mom and she says yes. They are, after all, friends and nothing more. She asks if she can stay the night with R after the party and her mom says yes again. She'll stay with R, but she'll also stay with C. He'll probably sneak out to see her and they'll probably get drunk off stolen Jack Daniels again.

She prints off the directions to C's house from Google Maps and gets in her silver Ford Focus and starts the 45 minute drive it'll take to get to his house. He lives off state line on the last exit before Idaho turns into Washington. She takes a left and follows it a ways and then stays right and then takes a left and then another right and then a left and follows it up the mountain to a beautiful house. It's painted forest green with those beautiful triangular windows that are the pinnacle of 70s architecture. The driveway leads up to a small shed off to the left where C's dad is working. She parks near the shed and introduces herself. He tells her his name but she immediately forgets it. She hears her name and turns to see C jogging to her. He's wearing denim shorts and a navy blue t-shirt and his eyes are sparkling.

“Your hair is red,” he says simply. He runs his fingers gently through it, tugging at the locks at the back of her neck. “I don’t like it.”

She frowns and tucks her hair behind her ear. “I do.”

“I’ll have to start calling you fire-crotch now. The red makes you look like a whore,” he whispers as he kisses her cheek. He says it quietly enough that his dad can’t hear. C introduces her to his mother, J—a beautiful woman with white blond hair and bright blue eyes just like C’s. J is lovely. They joke and laugh about something she can’t remember.

“C, why don’t you give her a tour?”

He leads her down the stairs to the basement. It’s darker and smells like a teenage boy—stale sweat, dirty laundry, the faint smell of cigarettes, and Axe body spray to cover everything up. The carpet is the moss green she remembers from her birthday the week before when they video-chatted. There’s a couch and an old TV but C doesn’t let them stay long in that living room area. He pulls her directly to his bedroom. He shuts the solid wood door behind them. He motions for her to sit on the bed and she does. The room is dark, the curtains drawn partially closed. There isn’t enough light to make out anything on his walls but it’s cold and it smells and she wishes he would open the window to let some fresh air in. A part of her wonders why he closed the door but the thought is smothered by his lips when they press against hers.

“I thought you were going to give me a tour,” she muttered when he pulled away. His room smells gross and she doesn’t want to spend a lot of time alone with him in his bedroom. “I’d rather go for a walk.”

“I’m giving you a tour,” he says, amused. He turns back, locks the door, and shuts the drapes in his room. He sees the look in her eyes and says, “Don’t be like that.”

She moves to stand up and again he says: “Don’t be like that.”

He puts his hands on her shoulders and pushes her back down onto the edge of his bed. She avoids his eyes and stares at the stained green carpet of his bedroom. He kneels in front of her and pushes her sweater off her shoulders.

“I don’t want to do this,” she whispers. “Can’t we just go for a walk instead?”

He chuckles. “Why would we go for a walk when we can do this?”

His hands come to rest on her thighs, edging up the skirt she got from Target for \$4. He presses his lips against hers. She follows his lead, albeit a little hesitantly. Her hands rest on his shoulders as his left hand begins to creep up her skirt, the patterned fabric bunching at her hips. His middle and index fingers touch her panties and her stomach leaps at his touch. She’d never been touched like that before. He leans in a little closer and presses her backwards on the bed. Her head hits his pillow the moment his hand pushes her panties aside and touches her.

She gasps and sits up, trying to push him away. “I don’t want to do this.”

He rolls his eyes and pushes her back down again. “Don’t be such a prude. I know you want to do this. You wouldn’t be wet if you didn’t. Come on.”

He reaches for her again, but she pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms protectively around herself. “I want to go home.”

He reaches for her again and this time she flinches because she can see the anger in his eyes. “Don’t be such a fucking child.”

She scoots back against the wall, further away from him. “C, I want to go home.”

He grabs her wrist, yanks, ignores her flinch, and hauls her to her feet. “Let’s go for that fucking walk then.”

~

The forest is cold or maybe it's cold because fear is a cold feeling, frigid and bone-chilling and she's terrified as he pulls her through the woods past his backyard away from his house and his brother and his father and the protection of his mother into the dense forest and up the mountain further and further away from anything she knows and is comfortable with and her fear grows and grows like a creeping afternoon shadow in her stomach, choking everything and strangling her and she loses herself in the fear and it's all she sees.

His hand: slick against hers, holding her hand too tight.

Her breath: buckling like her knees, sharp in her chest, hyperventilate.

Then his hand drops and her palm is colder from the sweat of his that remains. She looks around and he's nowhere.

She calls out.

Silence.

Quiet.

Not peaceful because his absence is concerning and he's in one of those world-conquering moods

She calls out again.

Broken twig.

Bird calls.

Hands scrape on rough pine bark as she checks behind trees for the man she loves

She wanders...wonders...wanders...wonders.

Turns around.

Trees unfamiliar.

Sky unclear.

Head fuzzy.

Him, gone.

Voice hoarse.

Turns around again.

Lost.

She has no cellphone, it's in her purse in her car. She turns once more, picks a direction, and starts walking. She checks over her shoulder every few seconds or every noise she hears which is often because the woods are a noisy place. She doesn't know how long she's been walking or how many times she's called out his name or how many trees she's passed or if she had even passed his house already.

She passes one big tree, a fir or a juniper or a spruce and her heart jumps in her throat when hands wrap around her and shoves her against the tree she wishes she knew the name of. She doesn't know why she wants to know the name of the tree. Maybe it would help the remembering later on when she's in therapy for all of this. Something to solidify the memory, solidify it in time and place.

His hands, both, wrap around her throat. Thumbs cradle the contours of her windpipe.

These are not the eyes of the boy she loves.

These are not the lips of the boy who gave her her first kiss.

These are not the hands of the boy who held her.

These are not his. They don't belong to him.

Her sweater rides up in the back and the bark scratches against her bare skin. Her vision swims with fearful and panicked tears. Snot drips from her nose as she cries and scratches at the hands around her neck.

"I'm going to fuck you," he hisses. "I'm going to fuck you here in the forest and no one will hear you."

Thumbs dig deeper, her feet aren't touching the ground anymore.

Heels kick

fingers scratch

eyes blur

skirt crawls

fingers push

a laugh

"It's gonna feel so good, baby. Feel so good when I fuck you." She feels the hard length of him against her stomach. Her hands are on top of his on her neck, trying to pry his fingers loose.

She can't breathe.

She can't breathe.

shecan'tbreatheshecan'tbreathe

nobreathnobreath

ohgodohgodohgod

It starts to get dark and her heart beats faster and she thinks it might explode out of her and then all of a sudden she's on her hands and knees on the leaves, coughing and heaving and panting and crying and her hands touch her neck but it's fire and it hurts.

“Run,” he says.

She scrambles to her feet, falls, tries again. She wants to go home so she keeps running and prays to whatever god is listening that he doesn't catch her because oh god, if he catches her she doesn't know what he'll do.

“You better run faster!” she hears him yell. “If I catch you, I'll fuck you! Run faster, cunt!”

She runs as fast as possible, arms pumping, heart thundering, not breathing. She doesn't dare look over her shoulder because she'll lose ground and she doesn't want to see how close he is. She hears him laughing, crazy and manic. It sounds like it's right in her ear.

His fingers, sharp, wrap around her elbow. He yanks her around.

Back of his left hand to her right cheek

—stunned.

She falls, hits her head on the ground. She's dizzy, can't see, can't breathe, panic ohgodohgodohgod.

And then she's on her feet again and he touches her cheek, gently, wiping tears, pressing his palm to the red mark on her face. His blue eyes are suddenly big and beautiful and he's back to the boy she loved. He kisses her lips, chaste, brushes the leaves and twigs off her sweater.

Takes her hand.

Leads her home.

## Why She Cut Her Hair

When she is

fifteen

she has long,

beautiful

hair

golden curls flowing

down her back cupping

shoulder blades

her pride,

her joy

her beauty

coiled

a heavy

weight

dragging

her down

digging

her grave



groanescapinglips  
hisslippingteeth  
screambeneaththetongue

when she is  
sixteen  
she cuts her  
long  
beautiful  
hair  
golden ringlets dyed  
red curled under  
her jaw  
tightly  
coiled

he hates it  
misses the way he could  
hold onto it  
misses the power it  
gave him  
he hates it hits her chin  
hates it's red  
hates he can't grab it  
hates she feels  
s a f e

## Self-Preservation

self-pres·er·va·tion

/' ,self ,prezər 'vāSHən/

the protection of oneself from harm or death, especially regarded as a basic instinct in human beings and animals

Out of survival comes the lie.

Twisted thornvines lifejacket around my ribs  
The words are horseradish bitter—my saving grace.

I cover myself with a truthshroud  
hide in the shadows of myself  
bury this piece of reality.

He asks me a question: “Have you ever seen a man’s...”

I lie <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I say  
yes  
once  
an accident.

I DODGE THE QUESTION, TWIST MYSELF AWAY. I CANNOT LET HIM SEE THAT I AM UNMARRED, UNTAINTED, *PURE*. I CANNOT LET HIM SEE THE PERFECT WORLD IN WHICH I LIVE BECAUSE IT IS A BEAUTIFUL LIFE OF LOVING PARENTS AND SISTERS AND ENDLESS FIELDS OF WHEAT AND STALKS OF CORN. IT'S A LIFE OF WHIMSY AND SONG.

If I tell him,  
    he'll darken it—  
        spill purple and yellow ink on my unmarked pages.  
He'll splatter the white with black,  
    cover it with nonsensical letters.  
Drenched with incendiary lies, I torch myself, and turn to ash in the wake of survival.  
    He scoops me up, embers and all, in his cold hands

*nvjkealni jg;rbeahjlbvjke*

squishes down, reaches in, digs about

*zjirenaf;cenmc,njirehauigprnejak*

scores of vermillion flashdance in my eyes

*uqncapr923hngjkrea/aa832(hr3ui2*

*blur it mark it rip tear strike underline sash and burn<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup> And daddy dearest finds the lie. He vibrates with disappointment, seethes with rage that I'd deign to lie. He doesn't see the bruised thighs, broken hymen, fingerprint necklace, bloody lip and brow. Or maybe he does and doesn't care.

"You've lied before, you'll lie again," he says to me. "I can't believe you anymore."

It isn't enough he never believed me, never stood in my corner, never comforted me in the rapewake.  
He shatters my credibility, frays my honor, leaves me. Hollow. It isn't enough he never believed me.

He'll never trust me,  
    believe me,  
        (love me)

## **forestsounds**

is it true

that when a tree falls in the forest  
and no one is there  
it doesn't make a sound?

I fell,

(just there)

in the woods

did I make a sound?

did my skull crashing against the earthroots sound like cracking thunder?

did my cries for help sound like crows shrieking over windrushes?

did my gasping breaths sound like gusts through fingerfronds?

did I fall on deaf ears

or

was

I

unheard?

## Thor

“Why can’t we set up a tent outside tonight?” M asks quietly. She stands in her best friend’s kitchen, holding her elbows. She tries to take up as little space as possible in the tiny, crumbling square of a house.

R turns, flicks her caramel dyed hair and sighs. “Because it’s supposed to be like thirty degrees tonight and I don’t really want to freeze to death.”

R’s father sits on the couch in the living room and lets out a raucous laugh. “Damn straight it’ll be cold tonight.”

M shifts nervously from foot to foot and glances around. The dishes in the sink smell and the father sits shirtless on the couch with a bottle of Jack. She turns to face R who is opening the accordion door of her bedroom and pulling off her shirt. “Please? Can we just camp out tonight? I have some blankets in my car we can use.”

“Why do you want to camp out so badly? It’ll be warm inside,” R deflects.

“Because I want to see the stars.” The truth is, she doesn’t want to stay inside R’s house. The house is tiny, smaller than her own living room and bedroom combined. The kitchen is cramped and the linoleum is pulling up in the corners. She can see nests of bugs living in the up-turned corner near the baseboards. The cabinets are missing doors and all of the mismatched Tupperware and china are stacked precariously as if one breath could make them topple. The sink, an old chipped porcelain sink, is full of festering dishes with a swarm of flies dancing overhead. The smell emanating from the garbage can is intense, like spoiled chicken and rotting vegetables, and it takes every ounce of strength not to gag.



R's parents are unsettling, though really they're her grandparents. R was abandoned by her drug-addicted mother and her grandparents adopted her, but they don't treat her well. They leave her at school well past normal pick-up time and drop her off in the morning as soon as the door is unlocked. Her grandfather-father has cloudy brown eyes and wandering hands. He likes to touch M without permission and R's grandmother-mother is short, squat, angry, and intimidating. The grandmother-mother yells at her when she's a guest and it makes her anxious to be around them.

M remembers a few weeks back in February before her first kiss with C when R's grandmother-mother had yelled at her.

"M, you should be a better friend," grandmother-mother shouts at her. R is face down on her bed, crying. "Maybe if you were there for her more, she wouldn't be such a fuck-up!"

M fears for her safety when they stay inside, but she doesn't tell this to R. She doesn't tell R that she doesn't want to be her friend anymore. If M doesn't have R, she has no one.

R finally agrees and they set up the tent outside in the yard, digging up big rocks to weigh down the corners.

They lay in the tent. The bottle of Jack her grandfather-father was drinking is passed back and forth between them. They laugh loudly as they share drunken stories about their boyfriends, the first time that C kissed her (she embellished and made the story much more romantic and enjoyable than it really was).

"We're supposed to go on our first date tomorrow," she says.

R sits up abruptly, sloshing Jack down her chest. "You've been dating how long and you haven't been on a date yet?"

“Only like two months,” she whispers. It is April 15th, exactly two months since they began dating but R doesn’t need to know that she has kept precise track of what day it is. She remembers February 26th was the day her first kiss happened. She remembers that March 23rd was the day in the woods. And tomorrow, April 15th, is the day of their first date.

“Finally! What’re you guys going to do?”

She shrugs. “I’m meeting him at the Spokane mall tomorrow and I think we’re going to see a movie. *Thor* maybe?”

With an exasperated sigh, R lays back down and takes a long swig of Jack before handing it to her. “That’s a shitty date. You’re probably not even gonna to fuck.”

She flushes a shade of crimson and pulls a blanket over her head. “We’re just seeing a movie. Plus I can’t have sex until I’m married.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” R starts.

“I know, I know.” She takes a sip of the Jack. “But I’m not going to sleep with C yet. Not until we’re married.”

The conversation dies and they finish drinking the bottle until they pass out.

In the morning, she can’t breathe and her throat feels like she drank barbed-wire. She sits up and her sinuses feel like they’re going to explode. She dials C on the phone. “I don’t think I can go on our date today.”

“*Why the hell not?*”

“I feel like shit. I think I have a cold.”

*“Drink some fucking DayQuil or NyQuil. I don’t fucking care what you have to do. Be there. I’ll see you at noon.”* He hangs up.

She drives to meet him at the movie theater near state line, nearly a thirty minute drive for her and only ten minutes for him. She waits in her car, wearing the same skirt from that day in the woods by his house because she knows it’s his favorite skirt. When he pulls up in his dad’s truck, she slips out of her silver Ford Focus and walks to him, self-conscious and afraid. After the day in the woods, she is always scared of him, always on edge, always anticipating the next time he will hurt her. His eyes are dark today and his jaw is set, lips thin.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hi,” he replies.

“How are you?”

He sighs. “Shitty. My dad was on my case about medical school this morning so I’m pissed. Can’t wait to get out of that fucking house and do whatever I want.”

She rests her hand on his shoulder and he shrugs it off with a violent jerk. “I’m sorry. Let’s just have fun today, okay?”

C rolls his eyes at her and they start walking to the mall. He steps onto the sidewalk, closest to the building and she to the road. They walk silently, six inches of space between them. She wants to reach out and take his hand but he is not in the mood to be touched and she doesn’t want to push him. She tries to ask him about his week, his school assignments, how track is going, if he’s learning any new songs on the guitar, but he doesn’t answer any of her questions. He just walks silently, brooding, while she tries her best to be a good girlfriend.

And then, without warning, he pushes her into the street.

Behind her, she can hear a car coming but she loses her balance and falls to her hands and knees. The car honks its horn, two quick beeps and one drawn out one before she can scramble upright and back onto the sidewalk.

“What the fuck, man?” the driver screams out the open window.

She wonders the same thing as C keeps walking and leaves her to brush off the gravel from the scrapes on her knees. She wonders why the driver didn’t pull over to help her, why he didn’t make sure she’s okay. C doesn’t look back at her and only stops when he reaches the ticket stand at the front of the theater. She has tears in her eyes and feels dizzy from both the amount of NyQuil she drank and from the pain and fear she feels. Nothing is quite real enough to hold on to and the world is spinning like it did when she and R were drunk on Jack Daniels the night before. The world is softer like a faint vignette at the edges of her vision. The pain in her knees and palms are the only thing grounding her and reminding her that she is where she is.

They walk into the theater quietly and sit down quietly.

The movie credits start to play and she feels like she needs to sleep. Her eyes sting from trying to keep them open and her body is tired. Her throat feels like she just drank battery acid. The lights drop off and *Thor* begins. She doesn’t remember much of it because she was barely conscious. She remembers Thor being outcasted by Odin, something about Loki and frost giants, maybe something about a giant robotic suit of armor Thor needs to vanquish.

C’s hand is hot on her knee and then his hand creeps up her skirt. His fingers grip her thigh, his fingers drifting up to the apex of her legs. She is not awake enough to say anything to stop him. She cannot muster the energy or strength. Her mouth feels empty and dry and her head feels like it’s full of cotton balls. She doesn’t really quite know where she is or what is going on.

His fingers creep up further and rest against her panties. He moves in his seat to get a better angle. Her body moves sluggishly as she tries to push him away but she moves in slow motion and he at full speed. She can't tell him to stop when he moves her underwear to the side, can't object when his fingers enter her, rough and dry and unrelenting. It doesn't feel good; she doesn't like it. His two fingers inside of her fill her with pressure like she's being pulled apart and stretched too far, in and out and in and out, with nothing to smooth it or make it easier. Just dryness. He pulls his fingers out, spits, slips in two fingers, then adds in a third, and uses his thumb to stroke her clitoris. They go in a little easier with the added saliva but she tries to shut her legs and squeeze him out but it isn't enough. It just eggs him on when she tries to fight it.

Her body jolts, nerve endings set alight, a strange numbness spreading throughout her body. She hears him laugh faintly as he continues to bury his fingers inside of her, his thumb incessant. She wants him to stop. She doesn't know what is happening to her but she is scared because her vision is swimming and soon, before she can register what is happening, a violent shudder racks her body and she is panting and he is letting his fingers fall out of her and she pulsates in the wake of whatever just happened to her.

She can't muster the words to ask what he did to her or what made her feel that way or why she felt like she was full of static and white noise—

## The Rape

*She will realize later when she googles rape that Planned Parenthood says that rape is the penetration of anus or vagina with an object or a body part, such as a finger or penis without consent. She will not realize it until she is almost a full decade older and her breath will leave her all at once and she will consider killing herself because she does not know that she will be able to come to terms with the fact that*

*she*

*was*

*raped*

*She can never take that feeling back and though he never entered her with anything more than his fingers, she feels like she is no longer a virgin. He has taken something valuable from her, something that can never be replaced.*

*She will never be able to watch the first Thor movie again, never be able to pleasure herself with her fingers inside of herself, never feel safe on the sidewalk closest to the street, never be able to have an orgasm without thinking about the first time when it was ripped from her body without permission.*

*She will be one of the estimated 1.3 million women who were raped in 2011, but not one of the 83,425 women who reported it.*

*And by the time she realizes what happened, it will be too—*

## Galaxies

eight years old  
monkey bars  
calloused palms, blistered fingers

pulls herself up, sits on the bars  
stares over the playground  
kids running  
    swinging  
        jumping  
on top of the world  
she lets herself

d

r

o

p

monkey bars in crooked knees  
upside down

she wants  
to play Star Wars  
climb trees  
poke anthills  
“No,” the boys say

and she goes home  
tells her mama she’s sad  
needs a hug, to be cradled

“Pretty girls don’t have bruises  
don’t have scraped knees  
ripped tights  
tangled hair  
dirty blouses.”



sixteen years old  
monkey bars  
cuddles her Scooby Doo

craves ball gowns,  
glass slippers  
shattered  
shards

sits with a boy under a pine tree  
stars in the sky,  
he loves it  
nebulae, galaxies, black holes,

v o i d

n o t h i n g n e s s

s p a c e

kisses her wrists,  
loves the hollowness between starlight

says he loves her and she is

vast

too vast

too

much

between

her

points

bruised knees

to

bruised throat

scraped knees

to

scraped brow

wants her nebulas cradled in his hands

splays her wrists

splits her dark apart

opens her up

leaves her—

now her galaxies itch to surface and her starts demand to be seen

## Death No. 1

He's sitting in the dark in his bedroom. She knows it's his bedroom because she can see the green carpet faintly illuminated by the light emanating from his laptop. Also illuminated by the laptop light is the kitchen knife he twirls in his hands. Her breath catches painfully in her throat as she tries to swallow the lump away.

"What's going on?" she whispers. She wishes that her voice was stronger, the voice of a woman and not of a child. But it comes out strained, thin, weak, broken. Unsure and scared. "Why are you holding a knife?"

He doesn't look up at her. His face is shadowed and dark. He doesn't answer. Just twirls the knife.

"You're scaring me. What's wrong?" She waits for a response but it doesn't come.

He holds the tip of the knife against the palm of his hand and twirls it with the other. She can see the point digging in and drawing blood. The blood trails down his palm towards his wrist.

"Please," she starts to beg.

He finally looks up after a pregnant silence. "I don't think I want to be alive anymore."

"What do you mean?" Her voice edges up in panic as he stretches out his left arm and places the blade against his wrist. "What are you doing?"

"I think I'm going to kill myself."

"No no no no," she stutters. "Let me help you. Tell me what I can do to help you, please. I want to help. What can I do?"

She frantically runs through phrases and sentences, anything that comes into her brain that might help him.

He looks up at her through his eyelashes. "I want to see you."

Her heart stutters. "You're looking at me right now."

"No," he murmurs. "I want to see you. All of you."

"I can't tonight. I can't sneak out again."

He shakes his head. "I *need* to see your body."

She whispers his name as her heart breaks. She knows exactly what he's asking and it's something she can't do. "I can't do that. You know that..."

"Forget it," he says as he reaches forward to shut his laptop.

"Wait!" she nearly shouts.

He hesitates.

She sucks in a breath.

"I love you so much. But I can't do that."

"That's not good enough," he mutters angrily. His voice mimics the sharpness of the knife that has begun to draw blood in his wrist. "If you really loved me, you'd do it."

She shakes her head and stares at her lap. She fidgets, tugging her shorts further down her thighs. "You know I love you..."

"Then you have to do this for me," he says blandly. "It's the only way I won't do it."

"Please," she begs.

"If you don't, I'll kill myself." He shuts his laptop, his words dangling in the air.

*kill myself*

*kill myself*

*kill myself*

*kill myself*

Her thoughts suddenly turn into a hurricane, with crashing waves and pelting rain and gale force winds.

Does he mean it? Is he serious or is he bluffing? Would he actually kill himself? She couldn't do what he wanted. It was wrong and broke the unspoken boundaries in place. If he did kill himself because she was too modest, would she be able to live with herself? Would she be able to have the guilt of his suicide on her conscience? And if he wasn't serious and he was trying to manipulate her, could she live with herself then? Could she live with the shame of exposing her most sacred places to him in such an unholy way?

Guilt or shame?

Does she take a chance and put his life on the line or does she put hers on the line?

She glances at the time on her phone. It's past midnight which means she's no longer fifteen because it's her birthday. She's crossed the border into womanhood.

"Happy birthday to me," she whispers.

She's made her choice.

She slips out of bed and starts to get undressed.

**whitenoise age 16**

P i a n o   m u s i c   d r o w n s   o u t   e v e r y   s o u n d  
t h e   s o f t   c o n c e r t o   d a m p e n s   m y   t h r o b b i n g   h e a r t  
N a k e d   f e e t   w a l k   a c r o s s   p l u s h   c a r p e t  
s o u n d   s w a l l o w e d —  
P a i n l e s s   a n d   p l e a s a n t ,  
c a l m

*then*

Constant static of rushing water  
crashing around me in the Other Room  
Naked feet on broken glass and bent nails  
pierced soles, red steps—  
Amplified pain, pulsating aches  
hurt



## Sostenuto

Three pedaled feet  
one—dampens all, fluid, blended  
two—singular staccato, short, sharp  
three—dampens individual, muffled, shrouded

I lay under the feet  
Once I was one  
    layered and lifted, soft and melodic  
Then I was two  
    rapid hammer strikes, precise, brief  
Finally, three.  
    ringing ethereal, sustained, prolonged

A seat of four legs, hollowed in the middle— that's where I lay. I stay in the space below myself, below the pedals, lined with felt and lowered down. Six feet under, six inches away from the keys, there's no difference to be had. It's neither a coffin nor a piano but both. The lid is closed and the sound stops, dampened with the third foot. Surrounded by ivory bone and wood, paper skin and ink blood. Scrawled on my wrists are ledger lines, scars as notes.  
My key signature is a flatline.

## Death No. 2

She walks out of sixth period choir in her junior year of high school, her books in hand and head in the clouds. She walks through the double doors into the school and straight to her locker. She freezes.

He stands with his golden blond hair and his red-streaked beard. His cerulean blue eyes and his crooked grin. He's leaning against her locker with his arms folded across his chest. She wants to go straight to her car and wait for her little sister and brother so she can go home, but her dad's voice echoes in her head:

*You're failing two classes.  
Do better.  
Don't let him scare you.  
Don't give him power over you.  
You're letting him control you.  
Don't be weak.*

So she swallows the vomit rising from her stomach and marches on. She stops in front of him, eyes on her feet. She wants to say something and ask him to move but she can't say anything. There's a million words on her tongue but they're trapped behind her teeth like they're a gate keeping them inside. She feels his fingers under her chin, tilting her face up to meet his. "It's been a while."

She jerks her head out of his hand. "That's my locker. Move."

He drops his hand and his eyes darken. "I know."

"So move," she whispers. She wishes she had more strength, always wishes she were stronger and braver.

He lifts his hand and places it heavily on her right shoulder. His fingertips dig in beneath her collarbone. He shoves her back into the stack of chairs behind her. “I don’t like your fucking tone. Better change your attitude.”

She rubs her arm where a chair leg collided with her bicep and her ribs. He storms away but not before squeezing her breast painfully. Her breath shudders back into her body and she doesn’t bother getting her school books or the Tupperware that’s been festering in her locker for two weeks.

Later that night after she’s been yelled at by her dad, after her little brother and little sister are asleep and the house is quiet, she pilfers five muscle relaxers and six melatonin tablets and seven ibuprofen followed by three quick sips of her parents’ brandy and hopes that that will do the job. But she wakes up the next day, cleans the vomit off her clothes and the bathroom floor, has her temperature taken, and goes to school.

## Setting Fires

*And if it doesn't take, add more paper and keep trying.*

She wonders if she would use the same process to set a house on fire. A house with people in it.

Would she need kindling?

Would matches be enough?

Would she need newspaper or lighter fluid or gasoline?

Would she need to bring ear plugs so she wouldn't hear the screaming?

Or maybe she would just go into the house through the sliding kitchen door, walk down the carpeted stairs into the basement, open the door of the room on the right, sit on his bed, drop a match in a bottle of lighter fluid and watch everything—herself included—go up in flames.

## Butterfly:Moth

Wiggle, inch,

wiggle, inch

second grade science project—olive slime, maggots mealy worm  
plastic lid, plastic cup  
butterfly to be  
munching milkweed leaves  
catatonic silkworm cocoon,  
little larva cup emptied to the butterfly exhibit  
a princess canopy bed, enclosed net mesh

the chrysalis breaks apart  
orange and black and white and dusky mustard dust wings

left, right

left, right

high school art project— silver see-saw scalpel, rolled gauze and tape  
sheet of paper, tangle of pens  
butterfly to be  
purple ink drawn by coiled hair  
keep it alive, keep it beating, breathing

razor ripped wings, stream of luscious blood  
lands and rests on the light knife and  
falls.

skin breaks apart, spreads wildfire  
warm pain welcomes an old acquaintance  
a moth to flame, voluntary subjugation

fleshy white and wine red and rusty brown blood

not butterfly—

but moth

### Death No. 3

She doesn't take muscle relaxers but drinks half a bottle of nyquil, takes six benadryl, and pops another seven ibuprofen. No brandy this time; she doesn't want to make her parents suspicious. She finds the razor she stole from her friends' sewing kit and drags it back and forth along her thigh like a seesaw. Back and forth so many times that she can't even count how many lines there are. But it's the same thing from the last time: she wakes up, cleans up the vomit, mops up the dried blood, and goes to school.

Wishing,

hoping,

praying

that she could just fucking die.

## eighteen

afraid for so long  
now used to  
    the pain  
second nature  
no difference

t h e u n f a m i l i a r

1

a pause  
caution and  
fear  
(will it work)  
(can i do this)

||||

a pause  
shorter and  
reckless  
(it'll work)  
(i can do this)

|| || || || || || || || || || || || ||

*a breath*

t h e f a m i l i a r

1

comfort  
red ledger  
lines  
(yes)  
(mmm)

| | | | | | | |

painless  
only relief

(sigh)  
(ahhh)

|||||



no pain  
only fear

oh god,  
too much  
blood

d                      z                      y  
                        i                      z

booze, blood, and pills  
hit all at once

cold bathroom tile  
and  
closed eyes

vomitpuddles  
and  
bloodpools

n o t h i n g m a t t e r s n o w

every hurt and every fear and every shame and every disaster and every mistake and every every

all

about

to

stop

(all that matters now is that nothing matters now)

## The Broken Zipper

11:00 pm

Time to fall apart.

My zipper has broken, the jagged teeth turning in wrong angles. It has split apart and I cannot redo it.

Open, I am undone.

My desk is covered with fibrous ink-words, hissing my name. My heart beats on and the shadow, cluster of blood vessels and nerves, the small heart, the ghostly silhouette of a feeling, struggles against my lungs.

It is tired of being hidden away.

And I reach in, navigate behind my lungs, around my spine, and grip tight. I tear the sinewy connections it has made and throw it onto the desk. It beats, moving a small fraction with each *tha-thump-tha-thump-tha-thump* until I'm sure it will fall off the edge. I nudge it back to the center, my fingers coming away bloody.

It cries out, demanding to be seen and recognized as a part of me. But I am too afraid of it. I am too scared to let it out, to run around, to follow me. I sit back, recoil from it, shrink into myself.

It groans as I reach for the stack of paper before me.

*whitenoise*

My fingers touch the pages of perfect white manuscript and the thing inside of me whines.

I want it to stop

I want

the screaming to end

the beating to cease

the whining to quit

the pain to numb

The lighter is in my hand

it's clicking

I'm pulling the trigger

setting the manuscript ablaze

my empty chest steams; it sighs on the desk

All it wanted was to see my life go up in flames.

## part three: resolution

“Is there no way out of the mind?”  
- Sylvia Plath

## One for the Money, Two for the Show

how did she end up here  
three glasses of cabernet in  
with her glass full again in her left hand  
the razor she's had for six years in her  
right itching to make a mark but too scared to commit to the  
pain her vision is blurred from all the alcohol but she  
doesn't really care she just wants her life to stop—not end—just stop so she  
can catch her breath because she just keeps drowning and drowning and  
drowning over and over and  
there's no break from the pain, no pause from the ache, no healing from the  
heartbreak it's all just the same day after day and nothing ever changes, she  
just hurts all the fucking time how did she end up here  
three glasses of cabernet in with  
her glass full again in her  
left hand the razor she's had for six years in her  
right a lovely, deep fresh cut on her  
left wrist bleeding nicely one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to  
fucking go.

## The First Joint

She takes a drag of the joint and she holds in the smoke.

She holds onto it like she's holding onto his last words.

It burns just the same way and she coughs it out.

She wraps the smoke around her lungs, until it fills her stomach, and she wants to swallow it down, to drown out the thing living inside of her chest.

She's gotten high more times in the past week than she has in the twenty-three years she's been alive.

Tonight, she's high.

Tonight, she sits with her friends in the IHOP, high off her ass on her first real blunt, not that vaping shit. She sits across from J who's laughing hysterically at the yellow/green lights of the ceiling. Everything is illuminated by the nauseating light and he keeps saying the word 'crepe' over and over and her other friends are staring at the two of them like they're insane. The two of them are the only ones who are high and she loves it. It's such an intimate experience, getting high with a friend for the first time and she feels so close to J right now. She's laughing and smiling and giggling way more than she usually does. Whatever the hell she just smoked, goddamn was it some good shit. She missed laughing that much and she missed feeling something other than what she usually does. It helps that her friends are who they are, but the weed makes her feel like she's like the person she used to be. It makes her forget that she's fat and ugly because right now, she just feel euphoric and light and all that matters is the sound of her laughter as she stuffs mozzarella sticks and onion rings in her mouth. She chugs a shitty vanilla milkshake and just *feels*. But not the normal feelings. Feelings she hasn't felt for so fucking long.

She gets a little more high when she parks down the block.

She walks home, smoking.

She walks into her building.

She sits on her bed.

She stares at her fingerprints.

Holy shit.

She's a real fucking person.

All these ridges and circles and round edges of identity are wild.

Then her eyes start to burn because she forgets to blink

So she blinks and lays down, stares at the ceiling, smiling.

Happy.

High?

Both. Both is good.

## whitenoise age 24

The room is square and about the size of the bedroom I had at our second house, the one at the orchard property in California. It's the one next door to Oma and Opa's house and I lived there from when I was ten until I was thirteen. It was less of a home and more of a house and I never felt comfortable there, but it's the room in my dream.

The walls are padded like the quilted back cushion of old couches with the pleats surrounding a button in the middle, everything cast in a soft pearlescent white that shifts to baby pink depending on where I stand. The room isn't empty like it has been in the past but it has piles of warm blankets and pillows, things that are knit and full of love and kindness. There's a rocking chair in the corner, the green one I used to sit in when I nannied for my sister. It's the one I sat in while I rocked my nephew to sleep after he ate from his bottle. Next to it is a stack of all my favorite books, the pages turned soft and yellow with time.

Faintly I can hear piano music coming from overhead. I don't see speakers but I don't care enough to search for them. There's a china teapot on the side table by the green rocking chair. My birth month printed on the side of the teacup, snapdragons swirling underneath the gold-gilt edges. On the plate is a piece of *boterkoek*, a slice of *spijskoek*, and a *stroopwafle*. I sit down, gather the blanket my grandmother gave me with the different breeds of cows on it, and sip my black tea. Everything is perfect here. I don't think of pain because here, I don't have any. There is only peace and contentment.

~

As soon as I put the china teacup down and blink, I'm in another room the same size as the last one but it seems infinitely bigger. The space inside is vast and complex, neither empty

nor full. I don't know this room like I knew the last room. Everything here is foreign and the complete unknown-ness of this room sends my heart thundering in my chest, my pulse thrumming in my ears.

The walls are torn wallpaper with exposed rotting wood beams. Cockroaches and spiders crawl through the gaps in the wallpaper. Everything is sooty-charcoal with spatters of rust red and stark, hospital white. No matter where I stand, I see the decomposition. The walls collapse around me, filling the room with the smell of mildew and wet wood. There's nothing here that is alive save for the bugs. Heaps of rubble surround me. Broken televisions with their screens shattered are piled in one corner. But still, these televisions blast the deafening static of white noise. That popcorn sound of styrofoam being crumpled in hand, fabric between teeth, nails on a chalkboard, a knife scraping the wrong angle on a dinner plate. There are books with singed pages strewn about the floor, words in flames and the unmistakable scent of burning hair and gasoline.

There is nothing but the white noise from the televisions. I can't hear my heartbeat or my pulse anymore. My breath is nothing more than the movement of my chest. I collapse in the center of the room and curl into myself, covering my ears and screaming for an end to this squalor, this static. No matter how firmly I cover my ears, how far I dig my fingers in, it echoes in my skull back and forth and back and forth forever and forever and I scream until my throat is hoarse and I cough blood and I cry until I vomit and am so weak I just lay there and I die.



## Sistine Chapel

I can never write about you. I come close and I start with your name and I can't even say it without my heart aching in my chest.

Is it a heart attack?

Is it a panic attack?

Is it my heart about to explode out of my chest?

It's just me about to say your name.

Who knew that four letters could be such a burden on my tongue. It isn't even a word that holds weight. It isn't 'love'; it's your name. But I guess your name always was something that felt like love to me. I would say your name and feel the immense peace, deep in my stomach. Your name was an anchor, holding me down in the best of ways. When I felt like I was drifting and spiraling out, you held me concrete and stable with just your name.

So I sit and your name is right there, waiting to be written and waiting to be set free and I can't do it. I can't write about when our friendship began or when I came to love you or what losing you felt like because it starts with your name. It's the only word in the English language that I can't say. I can say all of the profanities and I can even say the names of other people who have hurt me, but I can't say yours. I start and then I stumble and stutter and I get flushed and short of breath like I'm having an allergic reaction. My chest feels tight and my tongue feels heavy and thick and lazy when it tries to help form the sounds of your name. So I don't say it.

I can't write about anything until I write your name down because it always starts and ends with your name. How fitting it is that your name starts with the first letter of the alphabet and I can't start my story until I finish your name.

A.

N.

D.

That's as far as I ever get. Once I put that final letter down and finish your name, it's over. I can't hold onto you anymore. I can't keep this story inside me once your name is done. It's the final period of a novel, the credits of a movie, the last flourish of a paintbrush finishing a masterpiece. If I put that letter down, I have no excuse to keep you hidden away inside of me. If I can't ever say your name or write it down, then I have no story to tell.

I can never write about you because I can't finish your name and if I finish your name, it starts the next line.

And I don't want to start the next line because this prologue has been such a long journey.

Maybe if I just don't ever say your name or I give you a different name, I'll be able to write. But then I think about naming you something else—like Zeke which has the last letter of the alphabet because you're the last person I said I loved and I think that's fitting—and I can't do it. It's wrong. Your name was beautiful and to give you a different one changes who you are. You're the first and the A is significant. A is the easiest letter and you should be the easiest person to write about because you made me the happiest I've ever been. With you, I was the best me, the happiest me, the most fulfilled me. You should be an easy little couplet with a simple little rhyme but instead you're a sonnet with a rhyme scheme and format I can't ever seem to master.

I've tried to write you. I've tried to write you so much but nothing was ever good enough. Every metrical foot I assign to you is wrong because it doesn't capture your whimsy or your

cadence. I can't do you justice and I feel like I'm trying to paint the Sistine Chapel with Crayola water colors. It won't end well no matter how many hours I sink into you. I could lay on my back for hours with my little paint brush in hand and my shitty watercolors next to me with a cup full of black water and I'll never come close to your likeness.

I could spend the rest of my life sitting in front of an endless amount of paper with a supply of pens and coffee and I could never come close to capturing you.

Because your name starts with A and I feeling like dying because I can't complete you the way you completed me.

Once I put your name down with all four letters, I lick the stamp and mail the letter and I can't get it back. I can't cram my hand into the mailbox and reach for you and pull you back to me. You're sent and you're off and I can't fix it.

Once I put that final letter down, that's it.

That's the The End. I don't want to end it here.

But I need the ending so I can start the next story.

So here I go.

A.

N.

D.

I think writing your name is too hard; I don't think I can do it. I'm going to give you a new name, one that starts with A because I can't change that. I'll call you Atlas.

Atlas.

I think that's fitting. You always did carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. You always held everything up for me, took the weight I carried on your own back. And you always knew where to go and what to do. You were my personal compass rose, pointing me home and keeping me safe. I looked at you and I had direction; I knew which way to go. You showed me the road home and when I had you, I was never lost.

Atlas.

That's far less painful and only one letter more so I can keep you a little bit longer.

## Buoyancy

There are places that hold weight.

There are places that for each person is sacred. It's where they go to find solace. Their ultimate comfort is tied there and they are completed. For some, their place of respite is in the arms of the ones they love most. Others, it's the privacy of their home, the walls of a church, the altar of the outdoors.

But my tabernacle, where I feel most secure is not so easily found. It's not a lover, nor a church, nor a god. I cannot drive two hours north and get lost and be at peace. The place where I break the surface and cease to drown is worlds away.

The place I find my rest is hours, days away in a time years outside of now.

My holy ground is a place fixed in a point in time. I can pinpoint the place and day.

My sacred altar is across the country, over the Atlantic Ocean, through desert mountains, to *Yam ha-Melah*.

The Dead Sea in January 2015.

Like Atlas, the Sea has many names. Biblically, it is never called the "Dead Sea" but rather a literal name is given: The Salt Sea. It is referenced once in Genesis and not again until Ezekiel 47, when the prophet foretells of a time when the Sea will become a body of fresh water where many men will cast nets and bring in fish.

The Dead Sea.

Salt Sea.

The Sea of Arabah.

The Eastern Sea.

In Hebrew, it is called *Yam ha-Melah*: the sea of death.

This sprawling, land-locked sea is one of the most lifeless places. No brush or trees grow naturally nearby, but in the mountains that fence the sea in, there can be found ibexes, hares, foxes, jackals, and the rare leopard. The birds—seagulls typically—survive by flying to the mountains for food or by scavenging trash from the tourists.

Though there are no flora and fauna to speak of, the water is rich with bacteria and microbial fungus, causing the salinity to be a staggering ten times higher than that of the Atlantic Ocean. Because of its high salinity, the rich mineral-infused mud has medicinal and therapeutic properties often used to combat psoriasis, rhinosinusitis, and arthritis.

But the most interesting thing about the Dead Sea is its density. At 1.24 kilograms per liter, the water is extremely buoyant. It is almost difficult to swim, impossible to drown. Sinking is unthinkable.

You will always float in the Dead Sea.

And this is where I felt the most peace.

I can still see it, feel it all. It's a movie flashing through my head like a strobe light.

I and my Atlas, we are on the tour bus in the Middle East. I feel his knuckles shyly and delicately brush against mine. My stomach erupts in fireworks and I look to him. He is an unspeakable cyclone of excitement. As he is swept away with the vastness of where we are, I am paralyzed, rooted by uncertainty. He nudges me out of the bus and I turn back to him again, seeking the familiar reassurance that he's there, that he has my back.

The nearness of him is both comforting and suffocating. He smiles the same eye crinkling smile he does when he looks at me. And when he looks at me, smiles at me, it's the first time I truly feel loved. When his crystalline blue eyes twinkle at me, I feel whole.

On the street where we walk, we are inundated by colors and sounds and a million different scents. Racks of Israeli silk scarves beg to be touched, beauty products tested, and fresh pita and hummus tasted. But through it all the smell of his cologne cuts through and grounds me, reminding me that he is close. The pervading scent of sandalwood, cedar, musk, and bergamot wafts through the Israeli streets.

I look for a place to change into my bathing suit but I only see public bathrooms. He points and leads me up the hill and we part. He chuckles when I blush but smiles and averts his eyes when we rejoin. He pulls at the hem of his Jurassic Park t-shirt. He's as insecure as I am.

And then we're at the top of the stairs that will lead us to the Dead Sea.

He goes first, his hand stuck out behind himself should I need him. And I do; I always do need him. I fight the urge to take his hand, but the thought of him being just a breath away is enough to stifle my fears. We reach the bottom of the stairs and slip our shoes off. We walk side by side, barely any space between us until we reach the shore.

We stop. His hip brushes mine, his shoulder rests against mine. His awe is palpable and he sighs as if all the air has been ripped from his lungs. His mouth is open slightly and his eyes are wide. I stare at his beautiful face first before turning to see what he's so enamored with.

It's a grey sky. A grey sky meeting a muddy grey sea. But it is earth shatteringly beautiful. We take a few steps until we reach the cold sand. The salt-spray carried by the wind is even colder.

I shiver, wrapped in my towel as he tugs his shirt over his head. I close my eyes, take a breath, and drop my towel.

He takes the first step as usual and I follow him like always. He has always been the braver and I the more timid. He always takes the chances and I always play it safe. He holds out his hand for me and takes me into the water.

It is dark, murky, cold. But past the shore, the water clears to a charcoal grey that reminds me of the Pacific Ocean when it's stormy. There are hundreds of people in the Sea with us, but when I take his hand and he leads me in, it's only us. This holy, sacred place and it's just the two of us.

When I blink, we are further than I had anticipated we would go. The water laps at our knees and I want to stop and go back, but the way he looks at me makes me feel like I'm the safest I've ever been. Before I can say anything, he turns and faces me. Grins and falls on his back, allowing the water to help him drift away. He shouts my name and I get goosebumps. The fear in my stomach grows the further away he gets. His arms paddle in little circles and soon, he's nothing more than a speck on the horizon and I can no longer make out his reassuring smile and see his hand reaching out for me.

It's only me now.

Just me and the Sea.

I stand, alone, surrounded by other tourists who are laughing raucously. But I can't enjoy myself because I am more scared than I've been in years. I walk back to the shoreline and sit down, letting the water surround me. I let my hands fall into the mud and it's so soft it feels like the silk scarves hanging by the tour bus. It slips away with the current.



I hear him call my name and when I lift my eyes, he's walking to me. He's soaking wet but covered completely in the rich silt. He says he feels reborn, cleaner than he's ever felt. He reaches my side, extends his hand, but when I grab it I fall into the saltwater. I'm too tired and too in love to care about how foolish I must look.

I lay back instead.

I lay back and let the current of the Dead Sea take me wherever it wants.

Sea gulls shriek at the other tourists, screaming at them to go back home because they don't belong in this place. Nothing belongs in the Dead Sea.

Nothing living belongs here, but strangely enough, this is the first place that I've felt truly alive. This is the first place that I've felt like I belong.

I exist but not fully. I'm fractured, a piece of shattered glass held together by nothing more than chance. One gust of wind and I would be scattered, carried away to some place far away. I'm stitched together with delicate thread and safety pins. One tug and I would crumble. I belong in the Sea.

The water carries me and I drift.

## Anchor

Hold me up, weigh me down

s i n k o r s w i m ,

I cannot breathe if he's not around.

But the water,

t h e w a t e r h o l d s m e u p

I'll never drown

In the Sea, I will always float.

The safesoft moonwaves,  
the peacedesolate lifelessness,  
the lovedirectionless salinity

I crave these like I crave the love I had there  
like I long to belong to someone somewhere

Hold me up, weigh me down

s i n k o r s w i m ,

I cannot breathe if he's not around.

But the water,

t h e w a t e r h o l d s m e u p

I'll never drown

The drowning worsens  
I burn from the inside out  
the intensity of  
everything I feel  
My circadian curse,  
damnation from the gods  
is to keep my head above  
w a t e r

Sisyphus

Tantalus

*an impossible task*

I sputter, gasp, reach the surface, can't get a breath, swept under again, overtaken,  
tossed in the current, dragged further.

I hold on too tightly trying to stay above the horizon.

When floating is so difficult,

w h y

n o t

d r o w n ?

Why not get pulled under and

g i v e

u p ?

My buoy is gone.

My lifeline is gone.

I haven't my Atlas

I haven't my Sea

I am sinking,  
drowning again

I am held down  
weighed down  
anchored.

## My Screams

He wants my screams—  
ripped from my body like  
a child before its time, a  
visceral gash that groans in  
pain,  
a study in aching  
an exhalation  
of anguish  
Birthed from my fear

## Little Friend

She is haunted. Or at least, she thinks she is haunted. She isn't sure if it's a harmless little sprite that brings things back to her that she's thrown away or it's something darker like a poltergeist that wants to see her in ruins. Perhaps it's a ghost coming to haunt her and see her end. Or maybe, darker still, it is a demon she conjured when she was idolatrously worshipping the devil.

She can't be certain which it is or if maybe it's just a lost memory. But she is sure that she is haunted.

In her nightstand lives a little tin bandaid container. She has had it for years. She bought it for Atlas' birthday because he was always getting hurt, but when he found out that she was hurting herself, he returned it. He told her to put the bandaids to use if she felt she needed to. She has long since used all of the pirate bandaids for her cutting. She has replaced them with other bandaids, Batman and Jurassic Park and Adventure Time. Living with the new bandaids is a little stack of boxcutter replacement razors and the one she has had for years, Little Friend. The replacement blades are trapezoidal and not nearly as sharp as she would like them to be. But Little Friend, her favorite, the one she always reaches for, is rectangular and still sharp even after years of use. This razor has become a companion, a reliable friend through all things.

She feels the whispering of Little Friend. She feels his calling, the pulling in the pit of her stomach to open the top drawer of her nightstand, to pull Little Friend out of his metal cage, and let him dance along her skin. It's a terrifyingly strong calling, one she cannot escape. Anytime

she feels his voice murmuring in her head, she cannot help but go to him, to free Little Friend and let him play.

On March 23rd, the fourth anniversary of the day in the woods when she nearly died at the hands of the boy who was supposed to love her, she sits on her bed with her bandaid tin, a bundle of matches, and a box of tissues. Little Friend's voice has rung clear in her head for hours since she saw C dart across the parking lot of the grocery store. She felt a pull in her navel like a fishhook, calling her home, tugging at her almost painfully. She couldn't get home fast enough, couldn't find Little Friend fast enough and when she gets home, she slides open the book of matches, chooses one at random, and strikes it on the side of the folder. The match-head fizzles and pops and then she holds Little Friend over the flame, the edge turning hot in her fingers. The metal turns black. She turns the razor over and over, holding him over the match to kill the germs or disinfect him because the last thing she wants is for Little Friend to give her an infection.

She strips down to her bra and underwear like Little Friend demands. Little Friend is controlling and requires her immediate attention whenever he sees fit. In a way, Little Friend is like C and it is both comforting to feel that control held over her again and terrifying that she needs it so. Sometimes she thinks that Little Friend is the devil, her sin manifest and she is so possessed by him that she has no self-control, no free will. She is nothing but a slave to Little Friend and his whims.

Her bedroom door is locked and no one will bother her. She feels a grim satisfaction when she looks down at the body that she lives in and sees the latticework of scarring on her thighs and her wrist. She has no love for the vessel and at times does not even feel like her body is her own. She is possessed by Little Friends' desire to see her body torn apart and bleeding.

She looks down at her body. Looks at the canvas and wonders where Little Friend will demand to dance first, where he decides his first stroke shall fall: thigh? wrist? ribs? stomach? Here, with her blackened and still-warm blade, Little Friend beckons her to begin on her left wrist. She doesn't question Little Friend despite knowing that that place, the wrist, is the most noticeable place. He tells her to wear a watch and long-sleeves until it is healed.

She places the sharp corner of the blackened razor against the tender flesh and puts pressure.

*More*, he beckons.

She obliges and digs until the skin puckers and then splits. Each time she cuts, Little Friend demands more and it takes a little more pressure. Scar tissue on top of scar tissue makes it difficult to cut through but Little Friend requires her to obey so she does. She digs the corner in further, grimaces, and continues. She cannot disobey Little Friend now. She doesn't know how many strokes it will take to open the skin to his satisfaction, but she will do whatever he asks her to do. He will get her to the place where pain doesn't exist, where her fear and melancholy are replaced by the pain Little Friend gives to her, a pain she feels she can handle. She can hold on to that instead of everything else.

With one pass, her skin separates into the tiniest, most minuscule cut.

*More*, he coaxes.

She can see a little line of red where the blood lies just below the first layer of the epidermis. She places the razor down on the first cut and makes another pass and another and another until the blood is welling over the ridge of her skin and beading on the blackened razor.

When she feels the pain radiating up her arm and to her shoulder from the first cut, Little Friend tells her to make another. She creates another parallel line beneath the first.

The blood runs over and she continues the process until she has four parallel lines on her wrist, only two of which will be covered by a watch. She presses a tissue to the cuts and then waits, holding her breath while Little Friend decides where to draw next. It's always the same equation: skin + Little Friend + pressure + blood = relief.

On the white canvas of her thigh, Little Friend commands fifteen cuts stacked like roman numerals.

He has asked her for nineteen cuts. Nineteen cuts in total that make her feel dizzy from blood loss and weak from the pain. Nineteen cuts, one for every year that she's been alive. Nineteen times she listened to Little Friend.

She wipes the razor on a tissue and lays back on her bed. She closes her eyes and lets Little Friend rest on top of the bloodied tissues. Maybe today will be the last day of their friendship. Maybe today she expels the demon from her life, chants in Latin to banish him. She will try to get clean, break the addiction, release the poltergeist from his earthly prison. She is so determined that this will be the last time she listens to Little Friend that she sits up, too fast, and stuffs the bandaid tin with bloody tissues and razor blades and the spent matches.

She puts her clothes back on and marches downstairs to the garage where the garbage can is overflowing. Tugging on the blue plastic drawstrings, she stuffs the tin down as far as she can manage. Tomorrow is garbage day and her brother will drive his big white truck over, load the bed with all of the garbage and drive the two miles to the dump. Little Friend will sit in his tin in



the garbage bag in the dump until a week has passed and then he will be buried at the landfill and she will be free.

If she breaks from Little Friend now, she won't be tempted to listen to him later. If he is far away, she won't hear his voice beckoning her again. She stuffs the tin past the old egg carton and the chicken breast wrapper. Her hand comes away slimy with garbage residue and it smells like turned milk. She washes her hands and sighs when the water hits her still bleeding wrists.

She knows the tin is gone when the garbage cans in the garage are empty. She has not heard Little Friend since then and she feels relief. Relief because she doesn't have to be afraid of going too deep. Relief because the thing that controls her every move is gone. Relief because the thing that would take her to an early grave is gone. Relief because every time she opens her nightstand, she is not met with the banded tin and the call of Little Friend asking for a playdate. Relief because now she can lay in bed and go to sleep without first opening her veins and hurting herself to sleep.

She is surrounded by stacks of moving boxes crammed full with paperback novels and notebook after notebook of old stories she's written. It's four years later and she's ready to move to a new city and a new state, away from her family and all of the bad memories. There are black sacks full of too-small clothes and worn out shoes destined for the dump. She sits on her bed with another empty box and pulls open the top drawer of her nightstand: the tiny silver giraffe bracelet her niece gave her for Christmas, dozens of elastic hair ties, little scribbles her nephew has given her all take up valuable space. Years of memories she must haul with her to a new life. With a

heavy sigh she dumps the drawer unceremoniously into the box and then opens the second drawer.

A white binder with a clear slip cover and her name written in chicken-scratch print: Atlas' handwriting. She flips it open and lets her eyes gloss over words that don't mean anything to her anymore: treasured, valued, beautiful, savior. She shuts the binder and throws it onto the mound of garbage bags in the corner.

There's Atlas' old hat that he gave her for her birthday years back. She pulls it out lovingly but feels a misplaced weight inside. She reaches into the hat and feels a cold surface with corners and edges and hinges.

Her heart stops.

She touches the tin.

Did she remember throwing it away? Was it a trick her mind played on itself? She stares at the tin with wide eyes and then hears his still, small voice asking her to come play with him. She reaches for it, recoils as if electrocuted, and reaches again with shaking hands. Her fingers tremble as they wrap around the cold metal of the bandaid tin she threw out four years prior. She pops the lid off the tin and dumps the container onto her bed. The bloody tissues are no longer bright red but a rusty brown. The match that she lit to disinfect the razor crumbles and all the razors tumble out.

Although she had tried her best to break the habit, she wasn't successful. She found other ways to hurt herself. She took blistering hot showers that made her cry and her skin turn red and tender. She punched herself in the thighs until she had massive purple bruises that were painful to touch. She skipped meals until she felt like she might faint. She walked alone at night to the

grocery store and didn't try to rush anywhere when she knew there might be dangerous people with bad intentions. She scratched herself with her fingernails until she raised ridges that looked as if they might bleed. She pinched herself, snapped herself with rubber bands, pulled her own hair, anything that might cause a fraction of the pain she needed to feel okay.

Little Friend whispers to her through the tin walls of his little house and she can see his twinkling eye, his gleaming smile as he taunts her. Her chest constricts and she can't help but cry the tears she has been holding back for years. She picks up Little Friend, runs her finger along the still sharp edge stained with blood, and wipes the tears away with her other hand.

*I missed you,* he whispers to her with that same smooth voice.

She wants to throw him across the room, scream, cry, anything and everything. She was so sure she had thrown him away, so relieved when she thought she had broken through the bonds, released the ghost haunting her.

*Let's dance,* he murmurs in her head.

And she does the same thing she did four years ago, the last time Little Friend spoke to her. She finds her rectangular companion, lights the match, digs the point, puts on the pressure, and slips the edge under her skin until she bleeds. She cuts the same scar open from years ago because that is what Little Friend wants from her tonight. He does not want new strokes, only old ones reopened to make her remember how much fun they used to have together. She opens the scar that is blackened from when she burned the razor clean before. She doesn't bother cleaning it off because Little Friend was impatient. The four scars on her wrist from four years ago are not little white lines, but little grey, faintly blue ridges that look like strangely parallel veins.

Little Friend tells her to open them again.

He makes her create twenty-three new cuts, once again for every year she has been alive. It's seven on her left wrist this time, spread out from the junction of her hand and wrist to her elbow. There are two major cuts that stick out and are impossible to ignore. There are three smaller cuts in the space between that are fainter, spiderweb scars that she doesn't see unless she looks carefully. And then there are the two bigger scars by her wrist that are perpetually covered by her watch and she is most ashamed of those. These two are the ones that are faintly blue like veins and she hates them. Little Friend orders sixteen cuts on her right thigh and that is all. She has finished the task laid out by this malicious force, this demon that follows her and haunts her and makes her hurt herself and won't let her escape.

She will package up the bandaid tin, stuff the old and new bloody tissues in along with the boxcutter replacement blades and Little Friend. She will stuff the tin in a full garbage bag in the garage.

She walks away but doesn't feel the relief she felt the first time she threw him away. This time she feels hollow and empty, like she's saying goodbye to the love of her life, closing the door on an extension of herself, writing the epilogue of a story. She feels melancholic and heavy when she drags her weakened body up the stairs and sits on her bed in a room that is all moving boxes and empty white walls.

She sits in a cold, sterile apartment with white walls and cold, concrete floors. The place is all her own and she has no one to share it with. All of her hard work and sweat has brought her to a place of trees and rivers and rainclouds. A month after she threw away the bandaid tin with Little Friend, she is in Portland, Oregon. Amidst the empty and uncollapsed boxes, she feels a

hollowness. Not a hollowness that coincides with homesickness, but a hollowness that is deeper inside. An aching in her belly to feel something other than numbing loneliness.

She moves to her bedroom where the final full moving box is and before her hand can even touch the lid, she feels a buzzing in her wrist. A burning, tingling sensation she is all too familiar with from her years of dancing with Little Friend. Her body goes cold and her heart beats faster. Something in her periphery calls her name but no, she is alone in her cold apartment. She must be hearing things. She takes a deep breath, holds it in for a few seconds, and exhales. There is no one calling her name, she reassures herself. But now she has a nagging feeling that she has no choice but to sit on the floor of her bedroom and open the last moving box, the box that contains the contents of the nightstands' second drawer.

The box is full of things: a carrot shaped card her nephew made her for Easter, the silver giraffe bracelet, the paw print postcard the vet sent her after her kitten died, a notebook of old poems, and a porcelain thimble with tiny cardinals and pine fronds. She holds the carrot card tenderly against her chest and sees her nephew's sweet eyes, and goofy smile.

She has started over in Portland. She is a new person and she feels the most intense joy at the chance to be someone else, to redefine herself.

She places the carrot card in the bottom drawer of her nightstand followed by the postcard, the notebook, the bracelet, and the thimble.

The box is nearly empty.

The buzzing in her left wrist intensifies.

A hushed voice calls her name.

Her heart crashes in her chest.

Tremors spread throughout her body.

*Emm.*

She shakes the sound away.

*Emmmm*, it beckons.

A lump forms in her throat.

There is a plastic grocery bag full of nail polish. She removes the clattering bag. She sees a glimpse of brown and black. A rounded edge. A lid's hinge.

She chokes out a sobbing *oh god*.

Her fingertips touch cold tin.

## I Can't Argue

It is a dark void, one that echoes with voices. A shadowy nothingness, a formless entity. It doesn't have a face, not a mouth nor eyes. It has two voices, sometimes they merge into one and I cannot differentiate between the two. They layer and undercut, playing off each other. They get louder the more they talk.

These two voices are fully formed, each syllable a jarring cut, a punch to the throat when their words come out.

The first voice is the voice of my father, a low baritone cut with salt. With my fathers' voice and his alone, I argue.

When he tells me: "Do better."  
I say, "Fuck off."  
When he tells me: "That's not the Beukelman way."  
I say, "No, it's my way"  
When he tells me: "You're not enough."  
I say, "I am plenty."  
When he tells me: "I'm disappointed."  
I say, "That's nice."

The second voice is my own, the jolting low tones of my own vocal patterns filling the spaces in my head. I cannot argue with myself because if I can't trust myself, then I can't trust anything.

I say: "Kill yourself."  
I say, "Okay."  
I say: "You're the worst."  
I say, "I am."  
I say: "You're better off dead."  
I say, "You're right."  
I say: "You're disgusting."  
I say, "I hate myself."

And together, they merge.

We say: "Do better and kill yourself."  
We say: "That's not the Beukelman way, you're the worst."  
We say: "You're not enough and you're better off dead."  
We say: "I'm disappointed with how disgusting you are."

And they're right and I can't argue.

## **Fat Girl**

I am a fat girl.

And when I say ‘fat girl’ I don’t mean a “little extra on the sides fat” or “perfect hourglass figure fat” or “perfectly proportioned with the right amount of tit and the perfect amount of ass fat” or “flat stomach fat” or “the perfect amount of curve to hold on to fat.”

When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean tree trunk thighs that jiggle when I walk and spread out when I sit down. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean when I lay down, my stomach spills over onto the bed and I can feel the mountainous slope of it. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean stretch marks on my hips, thighs, back, boobs, ribs, arms. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean double chin. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean disproportionate body with a big ass and big hips and big stomach and boobs that get lost in it. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean I don’t get to shop at Target or Forever 21 and sometimes the ‘plus-size’ stores don’t have things that fit. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean I have high blood pressure—whether that’s from being fat or from stress or from trauma, I can’t say. When I say ‘fat girl’ I mean I wear shapewear and still have rolls that I can’t hide.

I am a fat girl.

And I am a fat girl living in a skinny world.

I am surrounded by salads and diet shakes, fit-bits and 10,000 step goals, calorie-friendly snacks and kale-infused everything. There is no room for me in this world because I fucking hate salads and diet shakes and I never make my step goals and I’d rather eat a bag of Doritos and a massive bowl of soup than eat low-calorie anything.

My life is a comparison and a never-ending Not Good Enough. My entire existence is constantly hearing that my diet needs to change, my exercise routine needs to be better, my



weight is a defining characteristic of who I am and if it's not under 200 pounds, then what's the point?

I am a fat girl.

I constantly feel watched.

When people see me, do they see the jiggle of my blubber? When I take the stairs, do people see a fat girl working on her health? When I take the elevator, do they see a fat girl being lazy? When they see me eating a salad, do they see a fat girl taking initiative? When they see me eating chicken strips, do they see a fat girl stuffing her face with grease and fat and carbs that'll just go to her hips? When they see me curling into myself and taking as little space as I can, do they see a fat girl wishing she could just cut off huge pieces of her body?

Because I wish I could. I wish I could just will all the weight to slough off to reveal this beautiful vessel that houses a beautiful personality and beautiful soul.

I am a fat girl.

If I could extricate who I feel I am and who I see I am, the topography of my body would be completely different. These hips would be slimmer, broad and wide still to give me the curves that are so desirable to men. This stomach would be flatter, slimmer, narrower at the space between my ribcage and my hips. These breasts would be rounder, perkier, perfectly proportioned and just the right size so I can find cute bras. These thighs would be a smaller circumference and I could fit into straight-sized jeans, a size 14 would be nice. And these feet, I wish they weren't wide and size 10.

If I could, I would go back to the body I had in sophomore year of high school when I was under 200 pounds and could fit into a size 14.

But I remember when C told me that he had cheated on me with three different girls. He told me months after the fact in such a blasé, nonchalant way. It broke my heart because my first thought was “God, if I was just prettier maybe he wouldn’t have looked away from me. Maybe if I weren’t a size 14, it would be better. Maybe if I didn’t take up so much space and I looked more like the women in porn, better and more definite curves, thinner waist that he could wrap his hands around, he never would have done it and never have wrapped his hands around my throat.” And I survived on green apples and mint gum for months and I wish that cheating was the worst that happened.

But even on mint gum and green apples, it didn’t matter.

He took advantage of my self-esteem and made me feel like I deserved to be hit and choked. If I wasn’t worth being faithful to, I wasn’t worth being treated well.

But it wasn’t enough. It’s never enough.

I am a fat girl.

I don’t know how to date as a fat girl either. I don’t know how to exist in this world of instant gratification and hook-up culture. I don’t know how to be a girl who doesn’t have a typical, average body. I don’t know how to tell people. I want so much for myself and I deserve to be loved and wanted. I deserve to be told that I’m beautiful and desirable but when I set up an online dating profile and it asks my body type, what do I say? I’m not average. I’m not thin. I am curvy. I am overweight. I am full figured. But what the hell do those mean?

I have hips and tits.

I have a belly.

I have a figure and it is full.

But what's the right answer? What's going to drive men away and what's going to keep them around? If I put curvy are they going to be disappointed when I turn up in shape wear that doesn't hide my back roll? Are they going to be disappointed when they see my muffin top spilling over my jeans? Are they going to see me eating on our date and be so disgusted that I'm not starving myself to try a little harder to be smaller? Are they going to judge me before they even sit down and tell me they're not interested?

Am I going to put myself out there for a man to judge me based off my appearance when I have a beautiful personality and I have so much more to offer? Am I going to let a man dictate how much space I feel I deserve by going home and wishing I could just cut away the slabs of extra on my thighs and stomach? Am I going to wish that I looked like those girls with the perfect proportions when I'm not that person?

Or am I going to stand up for myself, be proud of my body that has carried me through trauma and hardship and heartbreak? Am I going to allow myself to be belittled by a man I don't know and be degraded because I don't fit the wife mold he has set aside? Am I going to leave this date, crawl into bed, and cry because I did a difficult thing and I exposed myself and am proud or because I feel guilty for taking up too much space?

The answers to these questions?

I'll discover them as I go.

But this I know: I am a fat girl.

## The Second First Kiss

She was always a romantic. She cried at happy endings on Disney movies and sobbed at the swell of certain songs. She got goosebumps when her sister played Josh Groban on the piano. She sat on the one step just out of the dining room that led to the playroom and listened to her sister play and she cried and felt so much so intensely that she couldn't handle it. The weight of feeling things was too much and nothing but crying helped alleviate it. She was always a romantic.

Her first kiss was stolen from her by a boy who didn't deserve it. He didn't cradle her face, didn't hold her gently. He didn't whisper sweet words to her before he kissed her. He was angry and harsh, ruthless and cold, careless.

But now she's twenty-four and she has a man in her apartment. It's October 20th, 2019. She invited him, which she understands could have been a mistake for a first date but there's something about this man that she trusts. Maybe she's naive and hopeful since she's never really dated, but he sits at her kitchen table. He drinks his coffee, sits beside the bouquet of sunflowers he brought her, and watches her as she flips *pannenkoekjes*. She has never received flowers from a man before, but she has always dreamed she one day would. So when he arrived at her apartment building, his hand hidden behind his back, and revealed the bouquet of sunflowers, her heart almost burst out of her chest. He has glorious, oceanic eyes but not the tempestuous kind her first kiss had. These are lighter, brighter. He has a smile that splits his face. He asks her questions about her family, her favorite movies, her opinions on foods. He cares to talk to her,

wants to discover things about her. They enjoy each others company and laugh the entire time. By the end of the date, her face hurts from smiling and she feels so much lighter.

And he has to leave before she's ready. She wishes he could stay all day so she never has to be alone. He slips on his shoes, pulls on his leather jacket and steps towards her. He hugs her and she wraps her arms around him. She steps away and he says, "Wait, come back here," but it isn't forceful or terrifying. It's gentle and sweet, soft and kind. She steps back into his arms, and before she can say anything or even breathe, he kisses her. Instincts kick in and she purses her lips the way she knows to do. It's quick, barely a breath or a blink or a beat. She feels something happening to her body when he pulls away and immediately, he smiles at her. "Was that okay? Are you okay?" She nods emphatically because she neither expected to be kissing today or that a kiss could be so sweet. Because she has never known velvet kisses, only granite.

Later on, hours after he has left and gone home, he will ask her again if the kiss was okay, fine, comfortable. And she will be honest and say she was not expecting it and was flustered, but it was fine. It was beyond fine, it was perfect.

## Owl Pellets

Encased in shit,  
bonetresures within  
Swallowed whole, shat out, left to harden.

Break it

o  
p  
e  
n

s p r e a d i t o u t

dainty bleached  
boneremnants  
what used to be

Spread the thumb-shaped pellet open, sharp points extend into the air

Unfurled,  
what will it show me?

*Femurs, jawbones, tiny teeth, an inch long spine, the fanned out butterfly silhouette of a pelvis*

But I—  
I am full.

Exposed  
burned razors and  
copper curl tangles

What else will I find?  
sloughs of skin and  
crumpled red tissues

Matches fizzled, charred padlocks missing keys, underwear with ripped hems.

Pillows over faces and splayed legs, plastic cough medicine shot glasses.

Amniotic fingers in my mouth, a gripped jaw after a blowjob, a forced *thank you*.

Sea spray kisses, brown butter caresses masked by coal soot.

Dig deep  
Burrow  
Reach the center and spread it wide

w i d e r

w i d e r

w i d e r

until it's gone

(until I am gone)

## Second Date

Their second date is like their first. The majority is spent in her apartment, but the first half was spent wandering the mall and bookstore. They held hands in the car as she drove crowded Portland streets. They held hands as they walked through the mall. They held hands on the drive back to her apartment.

She is comfortable with him, a man. It's like she has known him all her life. They are compatible and have easy conversations. It feels natural to be with him. They have kissed once, on their last date, and she has thought about it every day since then. She wants to kiss him again and again and it is new to her.

A movie plays on the background as they sit on an air mattress in her living room. He has chosen *Moulin Rouge*, an interesting movie for a second date with a girl he barely knows. But she hums along with the music because she knows the soundtrack like the back of her hand. She can feel him beaming as she does. They sit with space between them, palpable tension growing with unspoken can-I's? and do-you's?.

Then, she looks at him and he lifts his arm.

He lifts his arm and says 'come here' and she does. She nestles against his side and lets him drape his right arm around her shoulder. She breathes in the scent of his deodorant and it reminds her of her grandfather—Old Spice. He lets his thumb trace little circles on her bicep, creeping up her shirt sleeve, then just up and down movements. They are little soothing movements that make her heart leap erratically in her chest. It's the most tender thing she has experienced from a man in her life. She tugs at the neckline of her navy-white striped t-shirt.



Then he starts to play with her hair, running his fingers through her curls, gently and carefully through the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. She tries to fight the mounting anxiety flowing through her veins because the last man to touch her hair was a man who took everything. She tries to regulate her breathing, calm her racing heart because she *wants* this. She wants him to touch her and hold her and kiss her. God, she even wants more than the little things.

He holds her hand, strokes the inside of her wrist with his thumb. His fingers are shorter, thicker than hers, his skin a tad tanner too.

He rests his hand on her knee and then on her thigh.

He leans his head on her shoulder and kisses her cheek and strokes her jaw.

And then, half way into their second movie, *The Labyrinth*, he looks up at her. She looks at him and wants so badly for him to kiss her but he smiles instead. “You seem nervous. Are you okay?”

She nods but she is nervous. He makes her nervous because she knows he wants to touch her more. Nervous because she wants him to smudge her lipstick and mess up her perfectly curled hair. “I’m okay. I think I’m just overwhelmed. But it’s not the bad kind of overwhelmed. I’m just trying to absorb all of this because it’s a lot.”

“If you’re sure.”

And then she makes an excuse to get up, to stir the soup, to stretch, to put space between her and this man because there’s so much stimulation. She doesn’t quite know what to do with herself. Her nerves are on fire because every touch sends a surge of electricity through her body. Her skin hums with manic energy that begs to be released somehow.

She sits back down again beside him on the air mattress and stretches her back.

“You okay?” he asks her, his hand resting between her shoulder blades.

She shrugs. “My back hurts. It’s stress related.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

She lets out a heavy sigh. “It’s the whole ‘taking seven classes’ thing. There’s so much reading and it’s so stressful.”

He watches her carefully. “Can I take your mind off of it?”

She gives him a faint smile. “Isn’t that what you’re doing right now?”

He smiles too. “Well yeah. But can I take your mind off of school?”

But she doesn’t know what he means by that. Is that his way of asking if they can make out? Is it a polite way of asking if he can feel her up? Does he just want to get closer to her? She doesn’t know what he means but she just looks at him and keeps smiling like she’s done all day. “No, it’s okay! I’m fine!”

And he just nods his head and puts his arm around her again and they sit quietly for a while. They eat their soup, they finish the movie. And then he looks at the time and says they have time for another one if she wants.

She says no. It’s been a long week and, though she doesn’t tell him, she’s extremely overwhelmed. He understands and puts on his shoes and gathers his things.

Then, because she already feels guilty for being unable to reciprocate his affection, decides that she’ll be the one to kiss him. He stands in front of her and she hugs him, telling him a hug comes first. And then she pulls away and kisses him first. And he smiles and looks happy and kisses her again, three, four times. Little, sweet kisses that don’t make her feel pressured to do more than that.

He leaves and she feels a strange sense of hollowness. He doesn't finish his wine, the bottle of French Malbec she so carefully chose for him.

After he leaves, she feels overwhelmed because she doesn't know the first thing about how to be intimate or how to show affection because she has never had the opportunity to. She has never cuddled with someone during a movie, held hands with someone who wasn't ashamed to hold her hand, never been with someone who wanted those tender little touches and wanted to be near her and didn't want to hurt her and use her and break her.

She wants to be okay with his arms around her and his hands on her, wants to be able to initiate touches too and be the one to start things, wants to be comfortable with all the attention she is receiving but she doesn't know how. But she doesn't know how to keep from flinching whenever a hand moves in her peripheral vision and she doesn't know anything about reciprocation.

And she feels guilty because she doesn't want him to think she didn't enjoy their time together. She loved his fingers in her hair and rubbing little circles on her arm. She liked his hand on her thigh and when he cradled her left forearm and absentmindedly traced the scars she isn't sure he knows are there. She liked the way he wrapped his arm around her waist and when his fingers played with the waistband of her jeans. She liked the way his fingers fit in between hers and traced her palm with his index finger. And she liked kissing him. She loves the feeling of his lips on hers and the way he held her elbow when he pulled her in and the way his sea-foam green eyes twinkled when he smiled after each kiss.

## The Nightmare

It's me and him,  
my new man and I

The two of us entangled, entrenched, entranced by each other  
His left hand on my waist, his right hand on my cheek  
my hands 'round his neck  
His lips so tender on mine:  
    begging,  
        pleading,  
            asking  
                And mine:  
            answering,  
                relenting,  
            offering

A conversation consisting of questions and responses,  
an ellipses ...  
an em dash hanging —

Never a demand, no period or finality to it  
Each kiss is another word in the sentence we're creating  
Eyes flutter shut like butterfly wings  
his dark lashes straight and beautiful against his skin

My desire dangles in the air before me  
and I want more  
His fingers unbuttoning my blouse  
    unhooking my bra  
        unzipping my jeans  
            tugging down until  
                I stand before him  
                    uninhibited  
                    unabashed

His seafoam green eyes, translucent, sparkling  
watch me, beckoning for an answer to the questions on his tongue  
And I respond in turn with an open space  
We lay down, me and him,  
my new man and I

I am bathed in newness, waves touching my shore,

baptized in the moment, christened and heralded:  
Here am I, bursting and alight

And there he is, my sweet man  
But when I open my eyes,  
the sentence

stops.

The conversation halts.  
Ellipses morph into periods.  
Em dash becomes an exclamation!  
Those beautiful oceanglass eyes, tender and infantile,  
turn tempestuous and grey-blue.  
The gentle hands cradling my face pin my shoulders to the bed.  
Sharp knees part an unwilling sea.  
Gentle waves turned crashing, swelling tides.  
I am left to drown,  
to sputter  
at the hands of my new man.

## Pull the Plug

I told my dad that I have a sixth date and you know what he said to me?

Guess what daddy dearest said to me.

*Oh wow, 6 already? And he still hasn't pulled the plug?*

As if I am unworthy of love

As if I am not someone worth six dates, seven dates, eight dates, or a proposal

As if I am somehow harboring this dark secret that will scare him away

As if once he sees the real me, he'll cut the cord and be free

As if I myself am not enough and never will be enough

As if a man will the the period to my sentence, where I am a semicolon; left hanging

He said: *And he still hasn't pulled the plug?*

As if I am an invalid awaiting a death sentence

As if I have a DO NOT RESUSCITATE tattooed on my wrist

As if I am living in a husk, a fragile bone hidden in a musky dirt casket

As if I am languishing for the button to be pushed to end my life

As if I am just breathing through machines and not on my own

As if I am a series of blips and beeps on a monitor

As if my very existence is dependent on the care and love of a man

He asks me: *And he still hasn't pulled the plug?*

As if there is a stroke of inevitability to the end of this relationship

As if my completeness rests on the decision of a man and not on my own shoulders

As if I am not strong enough to make decisions about my sex life, my love life, my fucking life

As if the only way to finish the equation of me and find an equal sign is to add a man

When the reality is this:

I am enough

I am complete

I am whole

alive

breathing just fine on my own

## Person

Yesterday,  
she wasn't real  
Nothing but a disembodied head  
floating, illusive corporeal mist trapped  
in a suit of bones and gristle  
Fine downy hair and tender veins  
Cartilage and fatty tissue  
underneath it all  
Thoughts racing  
around an empty room,  
bouncing back and forth and  
echoing in the halls of an  
abandoned mansion  
trapped within her skeleton  
Blank eyes roll back to  
stare at the inside of her skull  
Empty irises try to grasp phantom  
thoughts that slip through her  
fingers like smoke  
A body lies near her head  
but it is useless, worthless.  
Heavy and concrete, uncooperative,  
thick, vicious blood oozing through  
her veins like cold syrup  
Fingers twitch and little else moves  
the only real signs of life are the rise  
of a chest for breath and the  
*tha-thump-tha-thump-tha-thump* of a  
heart in a cavernous cage of ribs  
pulse ripples in her jugular  
Splintered and jagged fissures  
of dreams, spiraling fractals  
of abstract hopes.

~

A distant cry snaps her back,  
something within screaming life,  
requiring sustenance  
Blank eyes roll back and she is real.  
Blue irises fade to life, pupils dilate,  
Syrup blood warms and flows more easily.  
Breath shudders back into her body with deep gasps.  
Heart beats faster again as she leaves the catatonic state of non-existence.  
Cream colored paint fills her vision, sighs, blinks.  
Fingers twitch and limbs begin to move.  
A body reconnected to a severed head with surgical precision. Life breathes back into her nerves. Body  
rushes with warmth and vigor. Thoughts quiet down, shards reconnect and are made whole. Eyes capture  
singular thoughts and hold onto them for a few moments before letting go and moving to the next.

Yesterday,  
she wasn't real  
Today,  
she is



## Empire

From a young age, I was always told that I was born in the wrong era. Too old spirited, too sensible to be a youth in the new millennium. It made me feel cheated out of life, like I somehow was stripped of the possibilities of corsets and petticoats, separated from high tea and six different sizes of forks. It never felt fair that I lived now and not then.

I didn't see Rome or Egypt

Greece or China

Russia or the Ottomans

But I lived in an empire that I shared with my first love: Atlas

the greatest of empires

(he+me)

magnificence

lusciousness

greater than those holy ancient times

Like all empires, we fell—

crumbled to dust like ruined city walls

set ablaze and pillaged to nothing.

And I grieved this love for years until it was all I ever saw.

And then, I stumbled into a new empire, one with a stronger foundation.

—

We sit, E and I, in Adirondack chairs. It's an overcast day and it's almost too cold. We hold drinks, he a lemon-spiced cider and I a chocolate stout. We hold hands over a paint-peeled table.

The conversation is quiet, whispered words shared over whistling winds. He looks at me, I can feel it, and I stare ahead at my sister and brother-in-law's friends by the red tree. They are watching us but I don't care.

"I'll be a writer," I say, "and I'll make millions and we'll live in a French villa in Provence."

"I'll be the trophy husband," he says.

I laugh-smile and he continues: "I'll rewrite musicals in only minor keys or rewrite literary classics as puns. *Mansfield Pork* takes place in a barbecue joint. *Scents and Scents-ability* at a Yankee candle. *Werthering Heights* at a candy factory."

"You'll make bank with that." I grip his hand and smile at him.

"And I'll stand naked on the balcony with a cup of coffee and look out over my empire—"

“My empire,” I correct. “It’s my French villa, so it’s my empire. You can look out over *my* empire.”

He nods in acquiescence. “Your empire. I’ll admire all your work. And we’ll have a flat in London where we do the minor key musicals and we’ll split our time between London and Provence.”

I shut my eyes and picture it and feel it so deeply in my heart that I need this to be true.

Because this empire—the one we’ll create—is better.

It may not be grandiose  
historical  
lavish

But

it’s

ours.

It’s the empire we forge together out of sheet music and typewriter ink  
It’s cold coffee from the mornings we never finish and shared showers  
It’s sloppy kisses missing mouths and soapy eyes  
It’s hours spent singing in the car and yelling at bad drivers  
It’s spruce-scented candles and Yahtzee  
It’s naked Taco Bell feasts and Careless Whisper renditions  
It’s log-cabin simple, ramen for dinner easy, 4am snow drift peaceful.

I don’t need petticoats or corsets, hightea or six different forks. I don’t need grandeur or opulence, gilt edges or fine china, I don’t need Italian silks or first editions.

All I need is you and the empire we’ll forge.

I want now

not then

## Gaunt

We stand side by side, holding hands tightly as if life depends wholly on how fervently we hold to each other. We stand at a distance from a house painted sky blue with stucco walls collecting dust in its crevices. The child grips my hand twice, little feathery squeezes. Her tiny fingers fit perfectly in my hand and it feels natural. I look down at her, see the shift of her curls as the sunlight turns them to threads of gold. Her hair is in pigtails, set above and behind her ears. Each is twisted to form one perfect ringlet and they move when she turns her head, bouncing with the lyrics of happy childhood memories and undone dancing.

The familiarity of her eyes halts my breathing. Her wide blue eyes are mischievous, the fringe of eyelashes that give an air of porcelain doll-like innocence, her full lips split into a toothy grin, complete with an imperfect gap. She tugs my hand and leads me closer to the house.

“Will you tell me a story?” Her voice tinkles like wind chimes. “Please?”

She leads me down a gravel road, past ditches and sprawling fields of fading wheat and wilting sunflowers. The sky is a perfect expanse of cotton-candy blue. There are no sounds aside from the crunching of our bare feet on the gravel.

“What kind of story would you like?” I ask with the same tone of voice I’d use with my nieces.

There’s something about this child that feels comforting. She’s like home. When she touches me, a warmth reaches my chest and fills me to the brim. She looks up at me with another smile, softer this time.

I sigh. “Who are you?”

Her hand slips and she skips away from me, her jelly-bean patterned dress swishing side to side. “Don’t you know?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I knew,” I murmur. I pick up the pace to keep up with her as we pass a series of earth-toned houses, abandoned and empty. There’s something about them that feels like the past, a distant memory I can’t quite grasp. I hear the distant squawking of chickens, the lowing of cows, the shimmering laughter of children. An engine rumbles and I look around to find the noises. There’s nothing except the houses and the wide, endless swirl of sky.

She stops mid-skip. “For a grown-up, you’re not very smart.”

“That’s not very kind.”

The little girl twirls to face me, suddenly angry. “You’re one to talk. You’re not very nice to yourself, so why would it be different for me to be un-nice to you? We’re the same. You’re just older. And unhappier.”

“I’m not unhappy.”

The girl rolls her eyes. “Bullshit.”

“Language!”

“Bullshit bullshit bullshit,” the girl taunts. “Bullshit bullshit bullshit! BULLSHIT! BULLSHIIIIIT!”

I grab her shoulder, falling to my knees and looking her in the eye. “That’s enough.”

“I don’t have to listen to you.” She puppy-dogs her head at me. “Just because you’re an adult doesn’t mean anything. You’re me and I’m you and you can’t tell me what to do.”

“What?”

She sings: “*You’re me and I’m you and you can’t tell me what to do. You’re me and I’m you and you can’t tell me what to do.*”

“Wait! What’d you say?” I call out as she turns on her heel and starts to march past the abandoned houses.

“We’re the same person. And I still want my story.”

“I want to know what’s going on first.” I follow her. She leads me down the gravel road closer to the blue house. I don’t know what we’ll find there, but I know this house. I know this road. I know these fields, that barn, those ditches. This is my childhood home and I spent hours, days, months, a decade in this place. It feels unnatural. It’s the place I remember but there’s something different. The sky is robin-egg light in this little patch of earth, fading from bright to black in an ominous ombre. I feel a sense of urgency to reach the house. The sky darkens as the black tendrils consumes more. “What’s going on?”

The girl, *me*, shrugs. “I don’t know, I just live here. I don’t know what *you’re* doing here.”

“Why do I feel like we need to get to the blue house?”

“Cuz we have to? I don’t know.”

I swallow the lump of panic in my throat. “If I tell you a story, will you tell me a story?”

The child ponders the questions. “If your story is good, I guess I can tell you one too. But only if your story isn’t *bullshit*.” With that final word, her eyes twinkle and her wind chime voice is back.

She starts walking again, and I follow dutifully. “What kind of story? Happy? Funny? Scary?”

“I want a true story!” she shouts as she throws her head back to the shifting sky.

I lick my lips as we continue our trek to the house. The eery silence of the dairy is concerning. There should be more concrete details: a swarm of flies on every surface, people working the fields, the gushing of water through the ditches. There are no tractors and feeder trucks, no cows making known their discomfort. My father isn’t walking down the driveway with his Nokia cellphone clipped to his belt and his plaid shirt and his cowboy hat and his big clodhopper boots. My sisters should be playing in the yard with the hose and my brother crying from the kitchen as my mother feeds him smashed peas. *Where are the barking dogs in the hay barn and the hooting owls in the palm tree?*

There isn’t anything. Just the snow-like silence: a dampening, a swallowing of vibrations, a sustained, muffled note. “Once there was a little girl, a happy little girl. And she thought she would be happy forever. She thought that nothing bad would ever happen to her because she was so kind and happy and gentle and *good*.”

Before I know what words are coming out of my mouth, before I can grab hold of them, the story begins. I don’t want to tell this story. I don’t want this child to be afraid for the future. I don’t want her to know what’s coming but I also can’t bear the idea that she has no idea that her life won’t be jelly-bean dresses, fields of sunflowers, and skipping. Not for much longer.

I swallow. The words are salty, acrid in my mouth. They burn my tongue.

I let the little girl walk a little ways before I continue my story. If she is me, I want to put as much distance between us as I can before I tell her about when her life will fall apart.

“The little girl grows up happy and when she turns sixteen, she meets a monster. He does awful things to her—” I stop, my breath hitching in my throat. The little girl stops ahead of me,

glances over her shoulder, and her lips quirk into a frown. I take a breath and begin again. “He hurts her, scares her. He calls her names, pushes her, hits her, touches her when she doesn’t want him to. She’ll be really sad for a long time. Even when she’s safe from him after her parents rescue her, she’ll still be sad. So sad that covers up everything and makes it hard to feel anything but sad forever.”

I pause to see her reaction. She stops walking, stands stiff-spined, and fists her hands. The little girl stops and turns to face me. Her eyes are wider and sadder than they should ever be, rimmed with heavy teardrops. I continue: “She’ll wake up for school and want to go to bed. She’ll see her friends and wish she could sleep forever. She’ll want to die and she’ll do what she can to make that happen. She’ll hurt herself to feel better; she’ll be close to never waking up but something will always keep her from closing her eyes forever. She always wakes up.”

“I don’t like this story.”

“You wanted a true story,” I mutter. I swipe my hair from my face and huff. “You wanted me to tell you a story so I’m telling you a fucking story.” My body goes hot, sweat collecting at the base of my spine and my palms. I rub my hands on my thighs and try to take a deep breath but I can’t manage it. I’m angry at her, angry that she made me tell her this story, angry that she was so naive and innocent when she should have known better.

“Does this story have a happy ending?” she whispers with a heavy voice.

My anger dissipates and a wave of cold nausea sweeps over me. How could she have known better? I crouch down and look at her. I wish I could say yes. I wish I could say that the story does have the happiest of endings. But I can’t. So I shake my head and leave her question suspended in the air, answerless and empty.

I can see the little girl's jaw working as she fights back tears. She blinks and they fall down her perfectly rosy-round cheeks. Her lips quiver and she swallows hard. She points to the sky and the black has all but consumed the blue, leaving only the smallest of pinpricks of clear sky above the house. "I think we need to get to the house."

Micah—because that's her name because she is me and I am her and we are the same—takes hold of my hand and pulls me at a dead sprint down the gravel road. It feels like we're running through syrup. Every step is only an inch and every breath feels like we've run a marathon. I can feel her fingers digging into the back of my hand, finding the place between my bones and squeezing. The pressure jerks me back into my body reminding me that I'm alive. Our heartbeats merge into one and we fly down the road at breakneck speed.

We skitter to a stop, faces flushed. Broken breaths fill the air around us.

"What's in the house?" I ask as she drops my hand. She wipes her hands on the front of her dress, a thing she does when she's nervous. Micah chews on the skin from her chapped lips like we do, and heaves a shuddering sigh. Her sun-kissed skin pales and she begins to shrink back as if collapsing in on herself. Her shoulders pull forward, curled to make herself smaller. I repeat my question. "Micah, what's in the house?"

She shakes her head, ringlets swinging, gently hitting her cheeks. "I don't know. I always play outside."

"Why are we here then?"

"Because the sky is dark. I'm afraid."

I feel myself seizing up with terror. It digs deep into my belly, swirling the contents of my stomach around like a cup of gritty coffee. "The sky isn't usually black?"



Micah shakes her head and takes a step away from the paved driveway onto the gravel road. “I can’t go in there. I’m scared.”

“What’s inside?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “I haven’t been inside in a long time.”

“How long?”

Micah takes a small step back. “A long time.”

I reach out a shaking hand to rest on her shoulder but she shrinks away. Her fear is palpable and I feel it filling my stomach. My heart leap into my mouth, the hot sensation of vomit rising. I swallow it down and nod my head, lips pursed. “Okay. You stay here and I’ll go in. I’ll come find you when...”

I don’t finish my thought because I have no idea what I’m about to confront. I turn on my heel, give Micah one last glance, and take unsteady steps toward the front door of the sky blue house.

Everything feels unnatural—the stillness of the birch trees and the stalks of wheat on the far side of the fence, the lack of bird sounds and humming farm equipment.

There is no sound.

Everything is covered in a blanket of reticence, perfect and disconcerting.

I follow the sidewalk path to the front door, a door I rarely used when I lived here.

The faded wooden door stands ajar before me and I push it open.

Dank and stagnant air wafts toward me. Through the doorway, I see a figure in the shadows at the edge of the familiar brown linoleum where the hallway meets the living room.

There is very little light that filters in from the remaining sky but from what I can see, it's a girl. Older than the child, younger than I am. Her frame is slighter, thinner, more gaunt. Shoulders are slumped and bony, and head hangs low, chin resting on her chest. The girl's hair has a dull reddish tinge to it and again, my heart feels a familiar tugging towards her. Arms hang limp at her sides, fingers pointing downwards. Cardinal red flows from open wrists, drenching her hands.

I step into the house and my bare feet meet the cold tile.

As soon as I take that first step, I know I've made a mistake. The temperature drops the moment my feet make contact with the linoleum. My body erupts in a full body shiver. I don't belong in this house. I have no place being here. This hasn't been my home for almost fifteen years and I have no business coming back. This isn't my battle, not my war. I turn back and step toward the door but when I reach the open entryway, I can't make it through. It's an open path but there's something in my way and no matter how hard I scratch at it, I can't get out. It's an invisible barrier, a pane of glass that bars me from outside. The little girl steps into the doorway and must see the panic in my face. I am crying, pounding at the transparent barricade that separates us. Her eyes immediately widen and her mouth hangs open with a scream that I can't hear. She balls her hands into fists and beats against it. I can't leave, she can't enter.

I have no choice.

I have to keep going.

I suck in a deep breath.

"Hello?" I ask softly.

“Why are you here?” the gaunt girl asks, voice is raspy and low. Her head twitches to the side and her hair falls away like a parted curtain. Her skin is luminescent in the darkness like what I imagine a ghost would look like. I can see it even through the shadows in the entryway.

I step forward. “I was hoping you’d tell me.”

“There’s no place for you here,” she hisses.

I take another step. “Who are you?”

Her laughter comes out in a manic cackle, crackling through the silence and echoing off the walls. “The same little girl standing outside. The same person standing in front of you. The same person in front of me.”

“Micah.”

She gasps out a chuckle as if it surprises her to be laughing. “The one and only.”

This is Micah at sixteen. Just the way I remember her to be: the way her body collapses into itself like a neutron star imploding. Her uneven smile twitches..

“There’s no place for you here.”

“I can’t leave. I don’t know why, but I can’t leave.” I swipe my palms on my thighs, nervous and nauseous. “I have a feeling one of us isn’t going to make it through this.”

Micah rolls her eyes at me. “No shit.”

She steps forward as my eyes adjust to the darkness. I see her in the reality of this ruined home. Her hair is dull and lifeless, limply hanging around her face. Around her throat is a choker of purple and yellow fingerprint gems. Her left eye bears a similar shade of bruising. The right corner of her lip is crusted with dried blood. Her jaw is swollen. Her forearms from elbow to wrist are split wide open, blood freely flowing and coagulating along the edges.

This is the Micah I fear.

“You did this to me, you know,” she says. She sweeps her hair over her shoulder to bare her throat to me. “None of this would have happened if it weren’t for you.”

“You mean *you*?”

Her eyes narrow. “No, I mean *you*. If I weren’t so afraid of you, I wouldn’t have been in this situation to begin with. This is your fault. This is your responsibility.”

I step toward her, arms reaching because I know she needs to be held. She stumbles away and I follow her until we’re in the remnants of the living room. “You were young, you didn’t know better. You *couldn’t* have known better. It wasn’t your responsibility to protect yourself.”

Micah shakes her head. “No, it’s your fault. I knew what I’d become. I knew I would be you and I couldn’t follow that path. There was this picture of you, this unattainable mold I had to fit into and I couldn’t. I couldn’t become you. I couldn’t live in that shadow of potential. It wasn’t my fault, it was yours. If you weren’t so fucking perfect, I wouldn’t have done this to myself. I wouldn’t have found myself in *his* arms craving validation for being so fucked up. It’ll always be your fault. I’ll always hate you for what you did to me. You ruined my life, you *cunt*. YOU RUINED MY LIFE!” Furious tears pool in her eyes and intensify the color of her bruising. I’ve never seen someone shake so badly from rage but I feel it too. My hands shake the same way and our heartbeats match the same sprinting pace. I feel lightheaded. We sway where we stand, breathless.

I wade in the tsunami of her fury.

Micah tosses her head back and releases an earsplitting scream until her face turns red and she collapses to her knees. It rings in my ear like an echoing gunshot, my heart stuttering at the sound. She rests both palms on the floor and breathes audibly. Blood covers the floor where she stands in a slick and glistening puddle. The ringing metal smell of blood fills the room.

When I find my breath, I kneel before her with my hands on her back.

“You never needed to be anyone but who you were,” I whisper. I pull her into my body, her head resting on my lap as she sobs. I stroke Micah’s hair the way I know she needs. “The only person you should have become was who you wanted to be. You should have been you and not try so hard to become me. We would have been the same in the end.”

She lets out a shuddering sob, clutching at my shirt, pulling me closer.

I press a kiss into her hair. “This was neither of our faults. He should have known better. He was the adult. You were a child.”

The child stands in the doorway, eyes welling. I know as long as sixteen year old Micah is still alive, the child will never be able to enter the house. She will never be able to rest in her bedroom or sit in the living room while this broken creature lives here. And I will never be able to move on with this weight holding me back.

There is only one way to free us.

“It wasn’t any of our faults,” I murmur.

I swallow the bile in my throat and shift until the teenager is lying on the floor. Before Micah can respond, I straddle her chest and wrap my hands around her throat, fingers mirroring the bruises left by someone else.

She doesn't fight back. Her mouth opens a crack and she looks me directly in the eye, nodding as her eyes turn red and begin to bulge. My vision swims and I feel sick. Her lips move but no sounds come. Her hands drift up to my arms and her fingers wrap around my wrists. I can feel her body go heavy in my arms, slack beneath me.

*Oh god, what have I done?*

Her arms fall from my hands and she goes limp. There is still a twinkle in her eye, the last remnant of life and I shudder.

"It's okay. You were young. I forgive you," I say. The twinkle fades like a star blinking out of existence.. I hear the soft pattering of feet on the linoleum and the little girl stands in front of me. I push off Micah's body and curl into myself, sobbing. A gaping hole fills my chest as this extension of myself fades away. I cannot breathe, cannot stop shaking, cannot hold on to a thought aside from the *Oh god, what have I done* that races around.

There is silence. Not the same silence from outside that's eery and stifling. It's a softer silence, one that weighs less. Not a thick blanket, but a thin gossamer. My sobs echo, bouncing back hollow and resounding. A warmth rests on my shoulder and through my tears, I see the child standing beside me.

The child kneels beside me. "It was the only way."

I nod, pulling in a quivering breath as my entire chest constricts with pain—heartbreak, it must be. An emptiness fills my entire chest cavity, the same sort of loss I felt when I laid Opa to rest. Part of my consciousness slips away. This piece I can't hold on to anymore, the part that craves the darkness, the pain, the familiarity of hurting.

It drifts, dims, and dissipates.

The child kisses my shoulder and sighs. “I’m home.”

I sit upright, pulling my knees to my chest. I feel no peace like I thought I might, no sense of relief washes over me. Micah’s body lays silent beside me and I fight the urge to reach out and touch her, give her one last tender embrace even though she won’t feel it.

I do it anyway. I let my legs fall and I reach, pull her into my lap and brush her hair from her face. I stroke her cheek, small and gentle movements because I know she never had enough of them. I run my thumb along her lips, cracked and bloodied, and sigh. She feels hollow and light, like an empty husk, a papery exoskeleton and brittle bones.

She didn’t deserve this. That child didn’t deserve this.

*I* didn’t deserve this.

Distantly, softly, I hear a tapping. No more than faint fluttering. I lift my head and see the child walking to the french doors. A tiny brown moth flies into the glass, over and over and over. Micah turns the lock while lifting up the handle, and the door opens.

The moth flutters out and the sky begins to clear—slowly, slowly.

The black recedes to a pale blue that matches the house.

“I forgive you,” I say again. “I forgive you.”

## My Grand Caesura

He speaks in the cadence of whole notes where I reside in half steps.  
He makes octave leaps and bounds and I in sharps and flats.  
He is a major scale, whole and steady and unwavering and I? I am minor. I am discordant chaos  
that plucks at piano strings.  
He is energy and un-dampened melodies, rocking on the piano bench with shut eyes and lips  
spread to a grin.  
I am harmony sung on the same singular note that compliments but isn't enough to carry it's own  
weight.  
He is fluid arpeggios and full scales uninterrupted.  
His heartbeat metronomes in 4/4 time, constant and reliable.  
Even upswings, smooth downswings conducting a simple yet extravagant life.  
I want to live in the key of E, in his 4/4 time signature, in his staccato heartbeat, in major scales.  
Because here, in the key of E, I find my resolution.  
The discord and restlessness of a flat is raised a half step and I'm made whole.  
He is the ringing descant that balances my rumbling and hollow bass clef.  
He is the final breath

the last rest

an endless refrain

my grand caesura



## Flashbacks

We lay in bed, a film of sweat clinging to our naked bodies. He uses a pillowcase to wipe the cum off my stomach and my thighs. The blankets are kicked off on the floor and the sheets pool around our feet. He tosses the pillowcase onto the dirty laundry pile in my bedroom and then he lays on his side, his head propped up and his elbow digs into the mattress near my left shoulder.

“How was that?” he asks. He reaches over and places his hand on my chest. “Your heart is racing. You okay?”

I nod. “Wow. Yeah. Great.”

“You sure?”

“Yep, 100%.” I turn to face him. His eyes are half-lidded and his cheeks are flushed. He has pulled his lips between his teeth in disbelief. I roll over onto my side and face him—hand on his cheek, stroking his beard. “I’m good. I promise.”

He sighs, a heavy one and his breath hits my face—it smells like me, this musky, heady, vaguely earthy scent. I wish he would go wash his face because the smell of myself on him churns my stomach. In the moment, I love his face between my legs but afterwards, the shame I feel is overwhelming

I shouldn't be doing this

we aren't married

but God it feels so good

I shouldn't be doing this

but God it feels so good

we aren't married

I shouldn't be doing this

But I can't tell him any of this. I can't tell him that part of me feels disgusted by myself for this.

I sit up, stretch, and grab the sweatshirt I was wearing and slip it over. I can feel his disappointment that I'm covering myself up, but the guilt today is unbearable and I feel as if I may throw up.

The bed shifts and I feel his hands creep up the back of my sweatshirt and around the front, palms on my stomach, and he pulls me back against his chest. He kisses my neck. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“I've never had a thought in my life,” I murmur. I sigh and let myself lean back into him. He's warmth radiates, permeates to my deepest parts, and I shiver at the contrast between his warmth and my cold.

He chuckles. “I don't believe that. What's on your mind?”

*I think I regret having sex tonight.* “How much I love you.”

“I love you too, babe,” he says. He pulls a curl over my shoulder and wraps it around his fingers, twirling and tugging and I'm a child again sitting in my sister's lap while she twists and braids my hair in intricate plaits. “Anything else?”

*When you touch me, I get so lost in the moment and the feelings that I forget to think about if I'm feeling safe, if I'm feeling okay enough to do this. "That was fantastic." It isn't a lie.*

*He kisses my shoulder. "I love you so much."*

*You always say that after we fuck. "I love you too."*

He crashes down on the bed, head on the pillow, arm crooked under his head. He watches me carefully, his fingers dancing little foxtrots on my lower back. "I swear, you're the hottest thing I've ever seen. Your eyes are stunning and I get lost in them. Your lips, Jesus Christ, I could kiss them all day long. And your hips are just astronomically beautiful. The way you fit in my arms when we're laying in bed. You're perfect for me."

I lay down too, back to his chest as he wraps his arms around me. I instinctively bring both arms underneath my chin, hands clenched in fists. He boxes me in with four walls—his two arms, his chest, my mattress—and I feel claustrophobic. Burning heat rises in my throat from the pit of my stomach and I can feel the panic set in. His left hand shifts down to my breast, thumb grazing soft circles before he lets his hand drift down my snow-bellied stomach. My body tenses and I don't know if he feels it, but my stomach is in my throat and I think I might be sick. His fingers burrow through my thighs and his fingers poise at the apex where I'm still shaking.

He wordlessly parts my legs and my entire body starts to shake and he chuckles because I know he thinks it's him but really, it's fear. His wordlessness, his inattentiveness to reading me, brings me back to the movie theater in Spokane, Washington.

*I'm trapped in the aisle seat to his left*

*the world is spinning*

*my body is s l u g g i s h*

*my vision is SWimming*

*I am d*

*a*

*n*

*g*

*l*

*i*

*n*

*g*

*in this moment*

*[trapped in this horror]*

I gasp.

His fingers, three of them, have entered me and his arm wraps around the front of me, gripping my shoulder as he rocks against me. I can feel him against my hip, growing hard once again. "You like that? Yeah, you do. You're so wet for me, baby."

I hold my breath, clutch the pink floral sheets of my bed.

*You are safe.*

*You're in Portland, Oregon.*

*You are in your apartment.*

*This is E, not C.  
E loves you.  
E would never hurt you.*

*E would never hurt you.*

*E would never hurt you.*

He pumps his fingers his faster, hitting me in such way that my entire body is levitating. I'm moaning, gripping the sheets and then his forearm and then reaching back for his face as he kisses my neck.

"Yeah, you wanna cum for me again?"

My mouth is drier than it has ever been and I nod because that's what I know I'm supposed to do. And he drives deeper into my, rubbing faster, holding me tighter until his arm gripping my shoulder presses into my throat just a little and I can't do it anymore and I reach down between my legs and grab his hand, shuddering to a stop and faking it.

My chest is heaving—

my body is shaking—

I am exhausted.

He kisses my cheek and sighs. "Wow."

"Yeah...wow."

He curls up against me, head on my chest, arm around my waist. "Are you doing okay?"

I nod because I can't bear to tell him that tonight was a mistake. I can't tell him about the flashback I just had because it would break his heart and he would feel guilty and he shouldn't feel guilty because he did nothing wrong and it's all my fault and if I tell him, he'll leave me and I can't bear for that to happen so I nod and force a smile. "I'm good. I'm so good."

## **RE: Almond Orchard**

Row after row of almond trees, bare and skeletal. In the middle of the rows of trees are strips of faded grass and piles of crisp yellowed leaves. The sky is not blue, but rather steel grey. A blanket of thick, stratus and arcus clouds seep into the valley from the Vacaville Hills to the west and the Sierra Nevadas to the east. Crows hop from foot to foot in the leaves, pecking at hard-shelled almonds not harvested and long rotten. A cold chill sweeps through and the south wind rips through the bony fingers of naked trees.

## Fetal Position

S h e  
s l e e p s i n  
a ball like she's  
back in the womb just  
to protect herself  
because the  
one night  
t h e y  
spent together he teaches her that she  
should never sleep  
exposed.

he taught her to defend  
herself from attacks

he didn't teach her with  
words but through  
flying fists  
choking fingers

s h e  
feels it  
still at 3am  
when she wakes in  
a panic because the  
blankets creep too close  
to her neck and it  
feels like  
h i s  
hands

## A Body to Serve, A Body to Suffer

I  
have two bodies

a body to serve—  
my altarbody to worship  
a vessel of brilliant soul  
inches of empty canvas space

it sings with unabashed fervor  
humming with glistening descant  
breathgasps holding tunes  
*sing louder, exalt it*  
the patina shines and glows  
under illuminating sunlight

a body to suffer—  
my bodycross to bear  
a carcass of rolling white  
and red lighting strikes

we must speak in hushed voices  
and whispered words  
teethtrapped breath sounds  
*don't speak too loud*  
the fragile cover of skin  
will crack and split

I  
have two bodies

a body to serve—

a body to suffer—

## why can't I breathe

February 26th, 2020

2:17am

Sharp left turn—

blurs of red

flashes of green

through tiny pinpricks of water

Weighted hand anchors mine

fingers entangling fingers

keeping me from

picking

ripping

pulling

rending

*bleeding*

“We’re almost there, baby. Six minutes away. You just need to hold on for six more minutes and we’ll be there.”

He only calls me baby when we fuck.

Thoughtlessness,

parking lots as empty as my head

Silky smooth plastic

edging up my forearm

BEUKELMAN, MICAH JENAE

DOB: 4/29/1995

MRN: 20013903521

CSN: 50308297831

Adm: 2/26/2020

F 24Y

White spaces between thick bars and thin stripes

I am dazed—confused, the splotchboxes consume me

Fingers wrap around my bicep, squeezing, turning my fingers purple.

*beep 128/76*

Metal rod between my teeth  
*beep* 98.4°F  
Is someone squeezing my finger?  
*beep* 128  
Something cold touches my left breast  
*beep beep*

Saharan eyes and concrete jaw  
23, 27? No, 23. I'm 24?  
"Room 23, baby."  
Did I say that?  
I know what room  
I know my age

but...

why can't I breathe  
    why does my back hurt  
        why can't I blink  
            my mouth is dry can I get some water  
                why can't I breathe

w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e  
w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e

W H Y C A N ' T I B R E A T H E

w h y c a n ' t i b r e a t h e

Curtains that look like the bruises I bore  
    yellow mixes purple marbles green  
Oh god, I'm dying  
My family doesn't know that  
    I am dying  
Cycling, spiraling, shifting, consuming  
    nothing but the shades of panic  
        swirls of puke green  
        rotten banana brown  
        urine yellow  
        stomach acid pink  
            the twisted rainbow flutters and fades and firecrackers everywhere



does he see it  
does he see the colors  
or

the mounting shadows in the hospital room

I tug the bracelet  
let it dig into my scars  
if I hurt a little maybe I'll hurt less

Have you had thoughts of hurting yourself?

*No.*

*yes*

Have you had thoughts of suicidal?

*No.*

*yes*

Have you made a plan to hurt yourself or end your life?

*No.*

*yes*

When was the last time you thought about ending your life?

*Last year.*

*now*

When was the last time you hurt yourself?

*Last year.*

*now*

But they don't see the bracelet digging, slipping beneath my skin, sliding through the layers of fat—so much fat—and muscle until it reaches bone

or at least that's what I wanted

Maybe I want to be committed  
maybe I want to sleep for a thousand years  
maybe I want to be watched at all times  
maybe they'll drug me out of my mind and I won't have  
to *fucking think all the fucking time*

He reaches over  
unfurls my fingers  
rubs the crescents away  
smiles that smile  
"It'll be okay, baby."

will it

## 11:33am-11:38am

*11:33am*

I can't find my words. The page is blank and the vertical line blinks off and on every second. I'm supposed to write a story that takes place in five minutes but I can't because all I can think about is

*11:34am*

the hospital, the screaming child wearing a surgical mask, the homeless man with only one leg, the nurse with the nice hair, the doctor with the warm hands. I can't get the bruised curtain of my hospital room out of my brain. I can't get the itchy gown feeling off my

*11:35am*

skin. E's fingers tie a bow into the laces of the green and yellow checkered hospital gown. He gently runs his hands up and down my spine

*11:36am*

I don't remember much from it and I told that to E and he said he'd supplement my memories because he remembers it perfectly and I just feel guilty because he shouldn't have had to drive me to the hospital at 2:17am in the first place but he did and I shouldn't have asked him to come over I should have just suffered in silence like I usually do and my god, do I feel ashamed that he saw me like that but I guess it wasn't enough to scare him away because he's still here and

*11:37am*

he still says he loves me and now that he's seen me at my lowest, sobbing on the bathroom floor not breathing heart racing full body shaking undressing in the emergency room, he's still wants to be with me and I want to be with him but it isn't anything compared to the want I feel when I think about dying. That's a different kind of want and that end, that sleep everlasting sounds so inviting, especially because when I'm dead, I won't feel. But I

*11:38am*

still can't write so what's the point?

## Shortcake Dream

It's a Willy Wonka dream—

fields of apple licorice strands  
wisteria trees with cotton candy flower fronds  
perfumed puffs of purple citrus  
rivers of boysenberry syrup  
brownie crumble mulch

Sugar sweet, he holds my hand

we are dazed  
confused

It's a dream—

I look at him and his eyes, verdant gumdrops, sparkle under sprinkle starlight

The sun is a chocolate gold coin radiating bubblegum warmth

He points

I look

a field of sugar flowers and peppermint petals

We reach the field

he lays me down

worships at the shrine of my lemon curd thighs

## Letter to Him

I'm supposed to write a letter to the person I never talk about.  
And there's only one person that comes to mind.

Dear C—

There are a million things I should say to you. I should tell you all of the things that you killed for me: I should tell you how you ruined my life in a million different ways and how I'll never be the same again but honestly, I think that would give you too much power. And you don't deserve the power and you never did.

I don't know what I would say in this letter. I don't know how honest I can be because I know it'll never reach you and maybe this is the perfect avenue for me to get things out there. If I knew you were going to read it, I wouldn't write it. But because this'll be safe in my hands, I can say anything.

Right?

So maybe I'll take this power back and tell you how you fucked me over and ruined my life.

You know I can't sleep anymore unless I'm sleeping on my side, curled into a ball like I'm back in the womb? How I can't sleep unless I have my hands curled into fists underneath my chin to protect my throat? Even when I'm being held by the person I trust the most, I'm still afraid.

You know that I still flinch sometimes? Even almost nine years later? When men reach towards me, I feel myself shrink back? When my dad tries to hug me, my stomach churns and I feel nauseous? Sometimes when my boyfriend touches my cheek, I have to fight the urge to recoil? It's hard to let him kiss me, hold me, touch me.

Yeah, you did that.

And I bet you're so fucking proud. I bet you thought about it a lot, what you did to me. Or maybe you didn't think about it at all and you don't feel guilty about anything. Maybe you just go about your day and I never cross your mind and you know what? Good for you. I'm glad you can sleep soundly knowing that you've completely ruined peoples' lives because it just proves to me that you're not even a real fucking person. But you are and that's even more horrifying to me. People like you exist.

When I found out that you spent a year in jail, I was sad for you. I thought that maybe I was just something special you fucked around with but then I realized that I wasn't and I felt both better and worse because it meant that you hurt other girls the way you hurt me and it hit me that you're just fucked up and that's all there is to it. I felt sad for you because there's nothing else for you except hurting people and living in the wake of your destruction.

How does that fucking probation feel?

How does it feel to not be able to leave Idaho until 2022?

How does it feel knowing that your record, for the rest of your miserable life, is going to have that stain on it?

Criminal.

Probation.

Incarceration.

Permanent record.

I hope it feels terrible. You deserve it.

I think that the thing I'm most angry about is that I'm not even angry about it because in some fucked up, twisted way, I still blame myself for everything that happened to me. I still take responsibility for every fucked up thing you did to me and it

isn't even my fault. It never has been and never should have been.

You were my goddamn boyfriend.

You were the person I was in love with.

You were supposed to protect me, keep me safe.

You were supposed to cherish me.

You were supposed to love me.

And you didn't do a fucking thing.

I wasn't supposed to have to protect myself from you. I wasn't supposed to keep myself safe from you. I wasn't supposed to fear for my life every time we were together. But you did that and now it still follows me.

I can't even get angry at you. I can't even mourn for the things that you took from me. I've never allowed myself that kind of space. Nine years of not being angry at you for what you did to me. The manipulation, the choking, the gaslighting, the intimidation, the threats, the *rape*.

And there are parts of me that I will never get back. I will never be that person I was before I met you which isn't a big deal because I hated her anyway but I hate the person you made me into. I hate that terrified, cowering child. I hate the shaking and the nightmares and the insomnia. I hate the anxiety and the flashbacks. I hate the weekends spent in bed crying and wishing I was dead. I hate that I can't enjoy anything without feeling like everything good in my life is about to fall apart, like you're lurking in every shadow waiting to pounce.

I really don't have anything to say to you, really. I'll never really be able to tell you how bad my life has been because of you. And I can't tell you the good things because you don't deserve to know that I fucking *survived* you. You don't deserve to know the things I've made for myself, the life I've created,

the path I've forged. You don't deserve my happiness and you don't deserve my anger.

You don't deserve me and you never did.

So fuck you.

~~Sincerely,~~

Me.

## The Absent Zipper

11:00 pm

Time to fall apart.

The metal prongs are twisted—irreparable. I tug and tug and groan, trying to close myself up again.

It won't move.

I sit back, gasping and gaping. The cavern in my chest pulsates, echoing my heartbeat. I don't know what to do. I can't close it up, can't put myself back together. I could grab needle and thread and stitch it closed like I've done before but there's something so exhausting about even the thought of it that I can't. I can't find the energy to get up, rifle through drawers, and suture myself.

The shadow, cluster of blood vessels and nerves, the small heart, the ghostly silhouette of a feeling, beats wildly on the desk. It sees my effort to replace it and it hisses, writhes around.

It is still tired of being hidden away.

Its demands to grow—

to breathe  
to see the light  
to be seen  
to be absorbed  
become a part of me

Without it inside of me, I am hollow. The heart inside of me is not enough to keep me together and I can't walk around with this hole in my chest.

I grip the bottom of the zipper and pull, tearing the tissues and seams. Broken fastening pops and each time, it is the same pain that comes with ripping apart my wrists. Sharp and residual and throbbing.

It whispers my name now, softly.

The zipper is ripped to the middle of my chest.

The beating grows slower, resigned and calm.

With clenched fists, I wrap my hands around the metal teeth.



Grit my teeth  
fill my lungs  
*wrench it free*

The heart *hmmms* at me, languid.  
The zipper is gone  
I don't need  
to put it away  
to hide this

It is free.

A child, holding a teddy bear with fond tenderness, I cradle the heart. Stroke its lobes, caress its ventricles, whisperhush its frantic and angry beating.

I separate the walls of my chest, spread the space and make room for it. It preens as I place it behind the interlaced ribfingers.

It settles  
sighs  
I exhale and feel completed when its fibers connect to my chest.

It whispers my name  
*Emmmmm...*

We are one, finally, zipperless, uninhibited,  
free

and I—

***Het Einde***  
the end.

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